THE WORLD'S NUMBER ONE PC GAMES MAGAZINE

PC GAMER®

GAME OF THE YEAR AWARDS!
Plus: the MMO that whupped **World of Warcraft!**

UNCENSORED REVIEW INSIDE

Reviewed!
Monkey Island Season Finale
Lego Indy 2
Dark Void
& loads more!

HOLY $#&@! IT'S...

MASS EFFECT 2

BIOWARE'S EPIC SPACE OPERA HAS A WHOLE NEW ATTITUDE

BIOSHOCK 2
The verdict is IN!

COVER TITLES ARE CLICKABLE!

EPIC!
EVERY **CPU** & **VIDEOCARD** COMPARED

+ SUPER **MEAT** BOY!

$8.99US
03
NUMBER 198
MAR 2010
Future MEDIA WITH PASSION

PC GAMER

MARCH 2010

CLICKING A TITLE TAKES YOU DIRECTLY TO THE ARTICLE

EYEWITNESS

GAMING FIRSTS	5
MODS ON TAP	6
THE SPY	6
WORLD OF WARCRAFT: SACKING STRATHOLME	7
WAYS TO DIE IN FACE OF MANKIND	8
MMO BITS	8
DEV MAN TALKING: DAVE BREVIK	9
TRENDS: MODDERS OUTDOING DEVS	10
RELEASE METER	10

PREVIEWS

R.U.S.E.	11
LEAD & GOLD	13
SPEC OPS	14
SUPER MEAT BOY	15
M.U.D. TV	15

FEATURES

MASS EFFECT 2 REVIEW	16
GAME OF THE YEAR AWARDS	21

REVIEWS

BIOSHOCK 2	28
KING ARTHUR: THE ROLE-PLAYING WARGAME	31
DARK VOID	32
TALES OF MONKEY ISLAND CHAPTER 5	32
LEGO INDIANA JONES 2	33
ZOMBIE DRIVER	33
RISE OF FLIGHT	33
GYROMANCER	34
ROGUE WARRIOR	34

HARD STUFF

HP MINI 311	36
THE HOTTEST HARDWARE	37
STEELSERIES MICE	38

DEPARTMENTS

EDITOR'S NOTE	3
LETTERS	4
EXTENDED PLAY: DRAGON AGE	35
BACKSPACE	39

PLEASE NOTE

Screen shots and other artwork in this pdf have been downsampled and compressed. For the most accurate representation of game artwork please refer to your hard copy of PC Gamer.

This globe ain't warming fast enough

I believe that a translation error led us to think that Hell is a hot, fiery pit, when really it's cold. *Freezing* cold. Heat may be uncomfortable, but cold is a vicious beast with icy talons that flail at us and tear ragged holes into our flesh. I'm reminded of this because San Francisco is cold right now. *Nightmarishly* cold—I suspect that if I were to trip and fall right now, I'd probably shatter. [*Evan—Boo hoo. Signed: Former Residents of Michigan.*]

But there is one advantage to winter days like these, because there's nothing like coming home on Friday night, slipping into a warm, freshly microwaved pair of pajamas and playing games until Sunday evening. Ah, the decadent satisfaction of sitting down and actually playing a game all the way through—all at once! I imagine this is what PC gaming used to be like back in the covered wagon days.

This winter, by the by, we're seeing lots of fine reasons to be bundled up in front of your PC. See for yourself—check out our *Mass Effect 2* review extravaganza on page 42 (and as you can see from our cover image of Shepard and Subject Zero, the game has a distinctively zesty new flavor). We also review—at last!—*BioShock 2* on page 68, and on page 55 you'll find our annual tribute to the best games and the best gaming moments of 2009 (a year that did not lack for them).

Tragically, as I write this it is not yet Friday so instead of braving the cold and going home to play the biggest games of the season for myself, Dan Fitzpatrick and I have been staying late at the office, drinking room-temperature beer, and giving the magazine a fresh coat of paint. I think you'll dig the new skin; it's a little less frantic, and gives screenshots and the games themselves more room to be awesome.

Don't forget that you can catch the daily musings and thought-bombs of the *PC Gamer* staff by becoming a fan on our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/pcgamermagazine, and you're free to wonder what I was smoking when I posted something bizarre to my Twitter feed at www.twitter.com/arocklegend.

LOGAN DECKER,
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

POKING AROUND

Shocker! Fair, informed game reviews that help parents choose games appropriate for their kids—written by people who like games! ***http://www.commonsensemedia.org/game-reviews***

Snack Rounds: If you'd like to send games, cigars, or cookies to our soldiers, this site hooks you up with their wish lists and tells you how to get your packages to them. ***www.anysoldier.com/WhereToSend/***

Bacon Watch: The hostile takeover of our taste buds continues with Bacon Pop—delicious bacon-flavored microwave popcorn from the mighty men who brought us Bacon Salt! ***www.jdfoods.net***

THE PLAYLIST 0310

LOGAN DECKER EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

I'm flipping between the pastie-free European Cinema mode in *Saboteur* and desperately trying to catch up with the rest of the world and finish *Mass Effect*, so I can begin *Mass Effect 2* in style.

DAN STAPLETON REVIEWS EDITOR

Playing through *Mass Effect 2* and *BioShock 2* have made me a very happy, very sleep-deprived gamer this month, but they also left me craving something without a number on the end of its name.

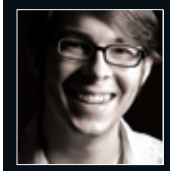
EVAN LAHTI ASSOCIATE EDITOR

How did I miss *Dawn of Discovery*? I've been so busy with shooters in '09, I missed the year's best "peace sim"—trading fish, building settlements and harbors within *DoD*'s elegant graphics is calming.

DAN FITZPATRICK LEAD DESIGNER

I've been playing *Tiger Woods PGA Tour Online*. You can pause a round at any time and continue later on another PC. I don't get why dozens of hot blondes follow you around, though. Must be a bug.

JOSH AUGUSTINE CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

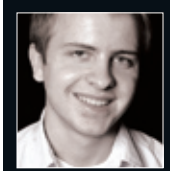


I've saved Ferelden as a do-gooder casteless Dwarf armed with shield and smile. Now it's time to torch the place as a pissed off Elven Mage filled with blood lust and oh-so-scathing retorts.

ERIK BELSAAS INTERN-NATIONAL MAN OF MYSTERY

I have done a bad thing. A very bad thing. I started playing *WoW* again, and with the 3.3 patch out, I don't see myself stopping anytime soon. Blizzard's new LFG system is pure genius.

PRENTICE GEDE FROM HERE TO INTERN-ITY



Nightly *Arma 2* sessions with Evan and the usual gang have proved that I am utterly incapable of piloting a helicopter without crashing and killing our entire team in a fiery explosion of incompetence.

Future MEDIA WITH PASSION

PC Gamer (ISSN 1080-4471) is published 13 times a year, monthly plus a Holiday issue following the December issue, by Future US, Inc., 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Periodicals Postage Paid at South San Francisco, CA and at additional mailing offices. Newsstand distribution is handled by Time Warner Retail. Subscriptions: One year basic rate (12 issues & 12 CDs: U.S.:$29.95. Canada: $49.95. Foreign: $69.95. Canadian price includes postage and GST (GST #128220688). For customer service, write PC Gamer Customer Service, P.O. Box 5158, Harlan, IA 51593-0658. Phone: (800) 898-7159. Online: www.pcgamer.com/customerservice. Subscriptions do not include newsstand-only specials. Postmasters please send change of address to PC Gamer, P.O. Box 5158, Harlan, IA 51593-0658. Corporate, advertising sales, circulation, editorial and production offices: Future US, 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Phone: (650) 872-1642. Fax (650) 872-2207. Website: www.futureus.com. Editorial information should be addressed to: Editor, PC Gamer, 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Overnight delivery parcels should be addressed to: PC Gamer, 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Unsolicited manuscripts cannot be returned or acknowledged. Future US publishes Guitar World, Mac|Life, Maximum PC, Nintendo Power, PlayStation: The Official Magazine, Pregnancy, Revolver, Windows: The Official Magazine and The Official Xbox Magazine. Entire contents copyright 2010 Future US. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited. Reproduction on the Internet of the articles and pictures in this magazine is illegal without the prior written consent of PC Gamer. Products named in the pages of PC gamer are trademarks of their respective companies. Future US is not affiliated with the companies or products covered in PC Gamer. IPM# 0781118. Produced in the U.S.A. Ride-along Enclosures in the following edition(s): B1, C1, C2, C3, C4. Standard enclosures: None. Publications Mail Agreement #40043631. Returns: 4960-2 Walker Road, Windsor ON N9A 6J3.

LETTERS

YOUR TICKET TO THE BIG TIME

We can't rule out the possibility that, upon reading your name at the end of a letter printed in *PC Gamer*, a wealthy Saudi prince will bequeath you his vast fortune. It's not impossible. More likely, though, you'll have your opinions read by gamers the world over. So email Letters@PCGamer.com today with your thoughts on the wonderful world of PC gaming!

WIN!

Mass Effect 2

Can't decide which of this year's biggest games to buy? Well, if you win one for free, that will make your decision that much easier. Enter our contest to win one of 10 copies of *Mass Effect 2* (reviewed on page 44) and free up your gaming dollars for Omaha Steaks or something. Email Contests@pcgamer.com with "PC Gamer Effect" in the subject line and your full name and mailing address in the body. See full contest rules on page 95.

Grudge Match

I've been looking for a good multiplayer first-person shooter game that I can play against some of my friends who are console gamers. I want to demonstrate to them how much more awesome PC gaming is by letting them experience for themselves the power of my far-superior FPS prowess! *Borderlands* looked ideal, since it's available on all the major platforms, but I get the distinct feeling that it's not possible to play cross-platform. Are there any games—FPS or otherwise—where gamers playing on different platforms can compete? And if there are some, you guys should let game publishers know that they should explicitly state that it's possible with their games. **DAVE MALONEY**

Cross-platform play seemed like it could be the next big thing when Microsoft was first pushing its Games For Windows Live platform, which connected PC gamers with Xboxers. There was just one problem: When thrown into a game together, mouse and keyboard players absolutely crushed gamepad players in shooters, so the lopsided matches weren't any fun. As a result the fad faded out before it began, and to date there is one—and only one—FPS that allows cross-platform play. That's Microsoft's own Shadowrun, *a multiplayer-only sci-fi/fantasy shooter where elves, humans and trolls shoot each other with rocket launchers.* Lost Planet: Extreme Condition *also allows PC and console players to compete in third-person shootouts, and if you're into real-time strategy,* Universe at War: Earth Assault *is the world's only cross-platform RTS.*

In *Lost Planet: Extreme Condition* you exterminate vermin, like giant bugs and griefers.

Shadowrun rewards cross-platform play with a GFW achievement.

Nobody wants to play an RTS on a gamepad, rendering cross-platform play in *Universe at War: Earth Assault* useless.

Respect my Consular!

In your January issue cover story on *Star Wars: The Old Republic*'s newly announced classes (which was excellent, by the way) BioWare's Daniel Erickson commented that Jedi Consular in the *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* games wasn't a viable player choice, and was simply "the other guy" who couldn't fight as well as the more classic Jedi Knight. Nonsense! On my playthroughs of *KotOR,* playing the Consular was synonymous with cheating or easy mode. Being a Consular meant not only were you untouchable as far as your foes were concerned (Force Wave! ...He stood up? Force Wave!), but you had class abilities that allowed you to throw around high-damage Dark Side powers like Force Lightning at hardly any cost, despite your alignment! Good times—especially combining Force Wave's stun effect with the Scoundrel's Sneak Attack. That was just evil! **BRIAN SCHUMACHER**

PC GAMER AFTER HOURS

MESSAGE BOARDS

PC Gamer Podcast Forum
pcgamerpodcast.com

GamesRadar PC Gaming Forum
snipurl.com/h6oor

FACEBOOK facebook.com/pcgamermagazine

TWITTER

Logan: ARockLegend
Dan: DanStapleton
Evan: ELahti
Josh: JAugustine
Erik: Belsaas
Prentice: PrenticeGede

MULTIPLAYER

PC Gamer Steam Group
http://steamcommunity.com/groups/pcg

PC Gamer/Maximum PC Team Fortress 2 Server IP
66.151.138.34:27015

"I know I would be willing to pay $20 for [*Dragon Age: Origins* co-op multiplayer] alone."
—JOE DAVAULT

With Force Wave, *KotOR*'s Jedi Consular could knock down entire rooms of enemies like bowling pins.

Enjoy!

Who cares if no one asked for it? We don't need a reason to reprint this creepy picture of Evan Photoshopped with an Aliens vs. Predator *Colonial Marine.*

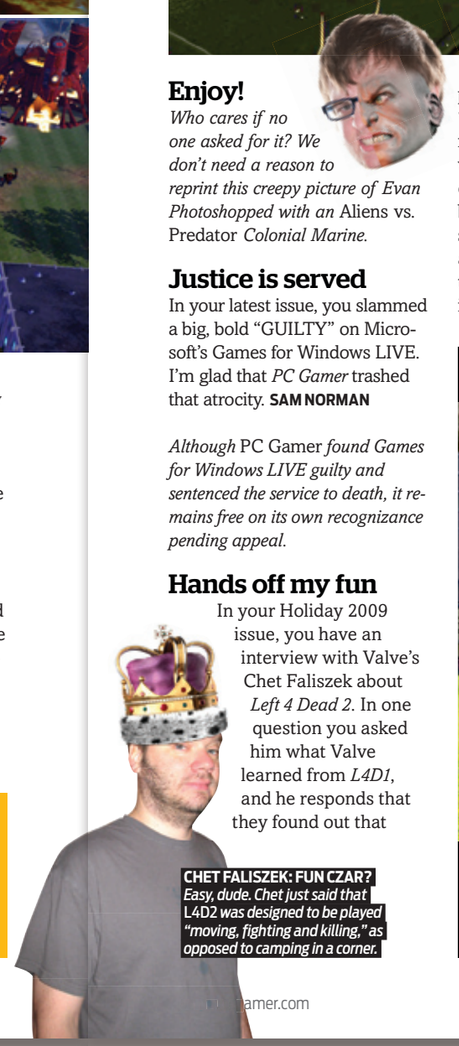
Justice is served

In your latest issue, you slammed a big, bold "GUILTY" on Microsoft's Games for Windows LIVE. I'm glad that *PC Gamer* trashed that atrocity. **SAM NORMAN**

Although PC Gamer *found Games for Windows LIVE guilty and sentenced the service to death, it remains free on its own recognizance pending appeal.*

Hands off my fun

In your Holiday 2009 issue, you have an interview with Valve's Chet Faliszek about *Left 4 Dead 2*. In one question you asked him what Valve learned from *L4D1*, and he responds that they found out that people didn't play the game the "funnest" way, but rather the fastest way. Who is he to tell us what is fun or not fun? Game companies fail and games fail because they think they are smarter than the actual players and end up screwing up the future games. Don't tell me what is or is not fun. **MARIUSZ ZACZEK**


CHET FALISZEK: FUN CZAR? *Easy, dude. Chet just said that L4D2 was designed to be played "moving, fighting and killing," as opposed to camping in a corner.*

Dragon Age: Bring a Friend Edition

I was wondering if you guys could talk with BioWare about implementing some multiplayer in *Dragon Age: Origins*. I really enjoy the game—and every game they've ever made, for that matter. I understand the cost, time constraints and the focus on a single-player story prevented them from adding multi, but maybe for a reasonable DLC price a lot of people would be willing to pay for multiplayer to be added to this already awesome game. I know I would be willing to pay $20 for this feature alone. **JOE DAVAULT**

We'll put in a good word for you, but Dragon Age *seems destined to remain a single-player adventure. You'll get a chance to bring your friends along on a BioWare game soon enough, though, in this year's most-anticipated MMO,* Star Wars: The Old Republic. *And next year brings* Diablo III, *which is being designed from the ground up to be a co-op action RPG paradise.*

PRTSCN Don't feed the bears

A picture is worth 1,000 words. **JORDAN CHALEIL**

Actually, according to our calculations this picture is only worth three words, and they start with the letters W, T and F. The Tank, the Terrorists, the Counter-Terrorist, the DOOM 3 *creature, Marcus Fenix, the zombie lady and the Stealth fighter all make sense...but why the bear? WHY?*

10 years ago

Issue 75 March 2000

COVER STORY: The Sixth Annual *PC Gamer* Awards.
Game of the Year: *Homeworld*
Action Game: *Rainbow Six: Rogue Spear*
Turn-Based Strat: *Alpha Centauri*
Real-time strategy: *Age of Empires II: Age of Kings*
Sports: *High Heat Baseball 2000*
RPG: *System Shock 2*
Multiplayer: *Team Fortress Classic*
Simulation: *MiG Alley*
Wargame: *Close Combat III*
Racing: *Re-Volt*
Expansion: *Half-Life: Opposing Force*
Graphics: *Quake III*
Hardware: *Microsoft Intellieye Mice*
Sound: *System Shock 2*
Music: *Homeworld*
Art Direction: *Homeworld*
Innovation: *Stariege: Tribes*

IN THE NEWS: Sierra explains why the *Babylon 5* game was canceled, Cavedog says it will set aside work on FPS *Amen* to concentrate on more *Total Annihilation* projects and Sid Meier announces a dinosaur game.

PREVIEWED: *Dungeon Siege, Alone in the Dark 4, Rune, Earth 2150, Simon the Sorcerer 3D*

NOTABLE REVIEWS:
Planescape: Torment (93%) "Black Isle Studios delivers an enthralling adventure through some of the most wondrous RPG realms ever encountered," *Quake III: Arena* (80%), *Gabriel Knight 3* (80%), *Close Combat IV: Battle of the Bulge* (84%), *FIFA 2000* (88%), *Jane's F/A-18* (93%)

BIG LOSER: *Test Drive 6* (11%) "About the only thing that Infogrames' latest motorfest will test is your patience."

HARDWARE: The GeForce-based Creative Labs Annihilator Pro (MSRP $299) takes first place in a graphics card roundup.

They Did it First

Join us as we head back to the '80s and '90s in search of PC gaming's true pioneers

In a world of clones and copycats, it's worth remembering that every idea was once new. Whether it's Richard Garriott turning himself into the world's first cosplayer by showing up at conventions dressed as his alter-ego, Lord British, or Westwood inventing the RTS in *Dune II*, these are the moments that defined the games we play today.

But what about some of the more obscure firsts? Who made games talk? Which FPS first came up with the idea of mixing driving and shooting, in the tradition of the genius who first combined french fries with ketchup or bacon with *more bacon*?

We've gone back into the archives in search of the geniuses, the dreamers, the designers and games that proved there were still ideas left to explore—just as today's designers continue to prove how much more there is to be done. **RICHARD COBBETT**

FIRST EASTER EGG

The very first secret little programmer's joke was in Atari's *Adventure* in 1979, which let you walk through a wall to see the writer's name. Awesome. The first game to become infamous for its Easter egg was *SimCopter* (1996), where a prankster programmer filled the streets with kissing men in Speedos on his birthday. And assorted other dates, as it turned out. His career lasted about five seconds after it was discovered.

FIRST VIRTUAL SHAG

If you can get excited about a text adventure trip to *Granny's Place* (1983) or Sierra's *Softporn Adventure* (1981), then you were a happy man back in the day. But really, *Granny's Place?* That's a Grade-A erection killer. Other early games weren't any sexier. Atari owners got stuff like *Beat Em And Eat Em* and *Bachelor Party*. PC owners had to make do with the cyan and magenta palette of *Astrot*t* (figure it out).

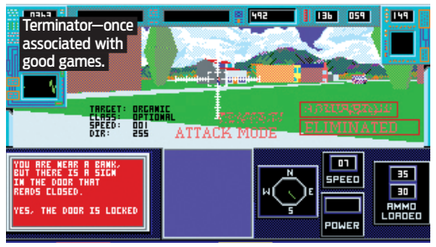
The first graphical bonk of note was with the hooker in *Leisure Suit Larry* (1987), which was more a parody than a remake of *Softporn Adventure*. Even then, the action is completely hidden behind a big bouncing CENSORED sign. And this was a game intended for grown-ups.

FIRST MMORPG

The original multiplayer online RPGs were the text-based MUDs, which date back to the start of the 80s. Graphical, massively multiplayer questing began much later, with 1996's *Meridian 59*. While very simple, the basic concepts stayed much the same for everything from *EverQuest* (1999) to *World of Warcraft*, despite the more ambitious functional world offered by *Ultima Online* (1997). Not until *EVE Online* (2003) would anyone come close to trying that again.

FIRST GAY CHARACTER

We'll highlight three here. Sadly, gay characters tend to be used more for comedy or eroticism than as regular people, but there are exceptions. Infocom offered a gay dude in the sci-fi *Circuit's Edge* (1990), and half of a lesbian couple in *Moonmist* (1986). Neither were playable, though. For that, the world had to wait for the bisexual Curtis Craig of *Phantasmagoria 2* (1996). Even then, the in-game relationships were between him and his two competing girlfriends.



FIRST DRIVABLE VEHICLES

If you're thinking *Terminator: Future Shock* (1995), partial credit. That was the first game to make jumping into a vehicle awesome, but the original *The Terminator* (1991) made it happen. As either Kyle escorting Sarah or as Arnie hunting her down, you had an open world to fight in, vehicles to steal and a seriously ambitious game to play.

FIRST SMASH HIT

Love it or hate it, *Myst* (1993) sold insanely well. Until *The Sims* came along, it was the biggest series ever on PC, the first game pushing over 6 million copies. Not only was it gorgeous for its time, it was one of the first games to really hammer home the benefit of getting a CD drive instead of messing around with a giant stack of floppies.

FIRST FPS

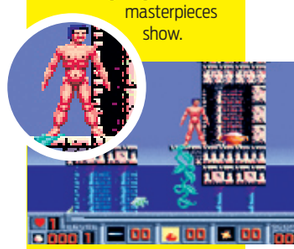
Ignoring vehicle-based games such as *Battlezone*, credit usually goes to *Wolfenstein 3D* in 1992. But *Wolfenstein* was actually id's second FPS—the first was 1991's *Catacomb-3D*, which later spawned the slightly better known *Catacomb Abyss*. Edging in just before either of them, though, was Core Design's *Corporation* (1990), which also featured some RPG elements.

FIRST TALKIE

In the old days, games came on floppy disks and floppy disks didn't have enough space for speech. Adventure games in particular jumped on the chance to upgrade to CD. Sierra cut its teeth with *King's Quest V* (1990) while LucasArts revamped *Loom* (1992). Other games, such as the first Tex Murphy game *Mean Streets* (1989), had little clips, but Sierra had the edge with the first full talkie.

FIRST AND ONLY

Some trendsetters fizzle out instead of making a mark. Sometimes that's not a bad thing, as these long-forgotten masterpieces show.



FIRST AND ONLY NAKED HERO

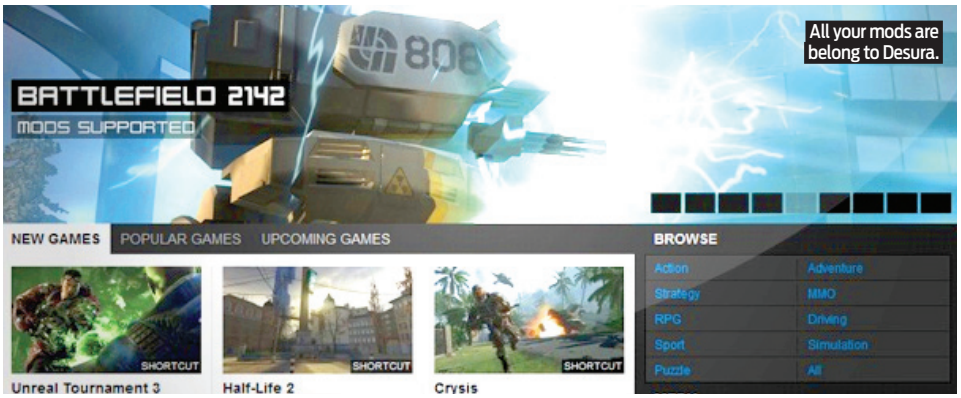
Believe it or not, if you exclude the porn games and cartoon animals, the first nude protagonist was a guy. In 1995, the *Lost City of Atlantis*'s hero had the misfortune to lose his pants after being shipwrecked, forcing him to platform-game buck naked. Despite the vast amounts of cloth hanging in the backgrounds...

FIRST AND ONLY ACCIDENTAL GIVEAWAY

The demo of *Robocod* ("James Pond") actually contained all the level data for the full game, along with a bit of code that locked out everything after the first couple of levels. What did they forget to take out? That's right: the "access all levels" cheat code.

FIRST AND ONLY VIDEO MAGAZINE

Click had the distinction of, or blame for, being the only periodical to be distributed on VHS tape back in 1991. Now, let's never speak of this again.



Mods on Tap

The world's first download service for mods is on the way. *PC Gamer* gets the inside scoop from **Desura founder Scott Reismanis**

PC Gamer: What is Desura, exactly?
Scott Reismanis: Desura is a digital distribution application for PC games, mods and downloadable content. [It also] manages your game and downloadable content collection for you. We give developers a voice and the ability to share news, features, updates, downloads, videos, images and other content with their customers and fans.

PCG: Where'd you get the name from?
SR: Desura itself is a combination of the words "DESIRE" and "DURABLE," as our aim is to provide a digital distribution platform that offers the most sought-after, desirable content. How I came up with that is beyond me. Brainstorming is a wonderful thing!

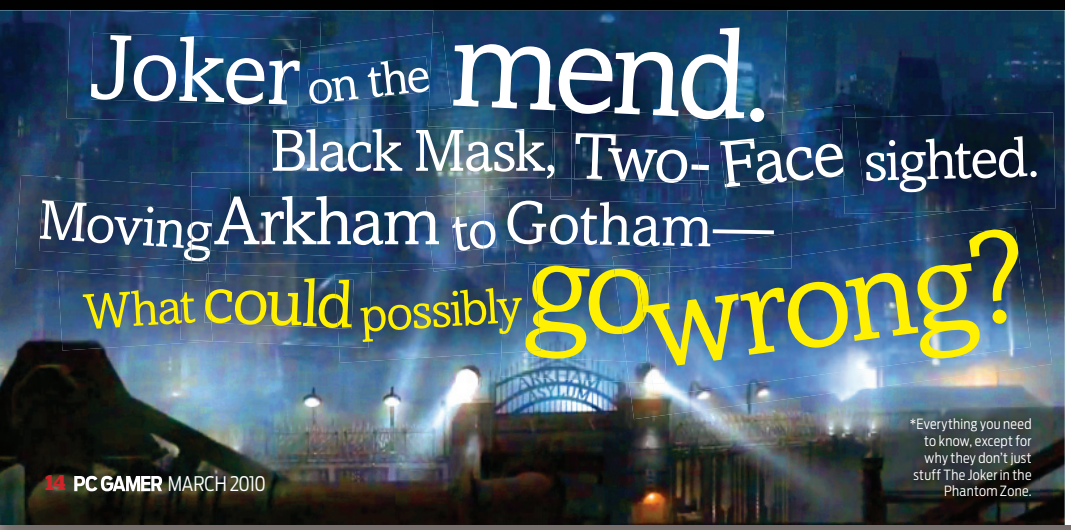
PCG: Why would gamers use Desura, instead of Steam or individual mod sites?
SR: Steam is a great service and dominates digital distribution on the PC for good reason (I'm a customer and fan). [But] we aim to put mods and add-ons made by the community at your fingertips. There is also our developer- and community-driven focus which I touched on, which we believe will set Desura apart.

PCG: Will you be able to download and run mods from within Desura?
SR: Yes! If a mod is supported by Desura, you will see an "install now or play now" button in the mod's profile.

PCG: How do you intend to make money from a service distributing free content?
SR: While we are yet to negotiate deals with publishers, we hope to make games available for sale via Desura.

PCG: When's the launch party?
SR: We'll open the beta up to everyone—I'd estimate this to happen by February 2010, though we haven't set an official date. Until then, contact support@desura.com if you would like an invitation. [We'll issue them] on a case-by-case basis.

The 17-word Preview*: BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM 2



The Spy

The Spy is never without a mirror. Not for vanity, of course—The Spy's face is a blank mask of anonymity—but in his line of work it's an essential tool for spotting those foolhardy enough to try to surprise him.

Mirror, mirror

Speaking of mirrors, The Spy was caught off-guard by suggestions that EA DICE is hard at work on a follow-up to *Mirror's Edge*. It was widely believed the sequel hadn't survived EA's recent downsizing, but The Spy, ever vigilant to the truth, was able to crawl through internet vents to lighting designer Oscar Carlen's LinkedIn profile and found references to *Mirror's Edge 2*.

Field of dreams

Thighs bulging in his spandex suit, The Spy was about to begin his extraction when he spotted something else on LinkedIn. Another DICE title apparently confirmed by loose-lips Carlen: *Battlefield 3*.

Duty bound

The Spy found it embarrassingly easy to infiltrate Activision, where the news is that a third development team has answered the *Call of Duty*, and will be working on an as-yet unannounced game in the series. There are rumors that *CoD* bosses are considering adding a massively multiplayer game to their armory. The *LA Times* reported this information from a source "close to ActiBlizz." It's hard to get much closer to the publishers than The Spy's current position under Bobby Kotick's desk.

Run for the border

Gearbox boss Randy Pitchford made it clear *Borderlands* was a gamble in these sequel-heavy times, but it sold well and is currently enjoying its first jab of downloadable content. Another will hit early this year —a *Mad Max*–themed set of arenas—and The Spy's ear to the ground says to expect even more after this.

Afraid again

The Spy is never scared. But if he was to be scared, it would be by *F.E.A.R.*'s spooky ghost-child, Alma. A Monolith artist has revealed that *F.E.A.R. 3* is in development, to be subtitled *Project Hades*. Leave The Spy's nightlight on, would you? Spy out.

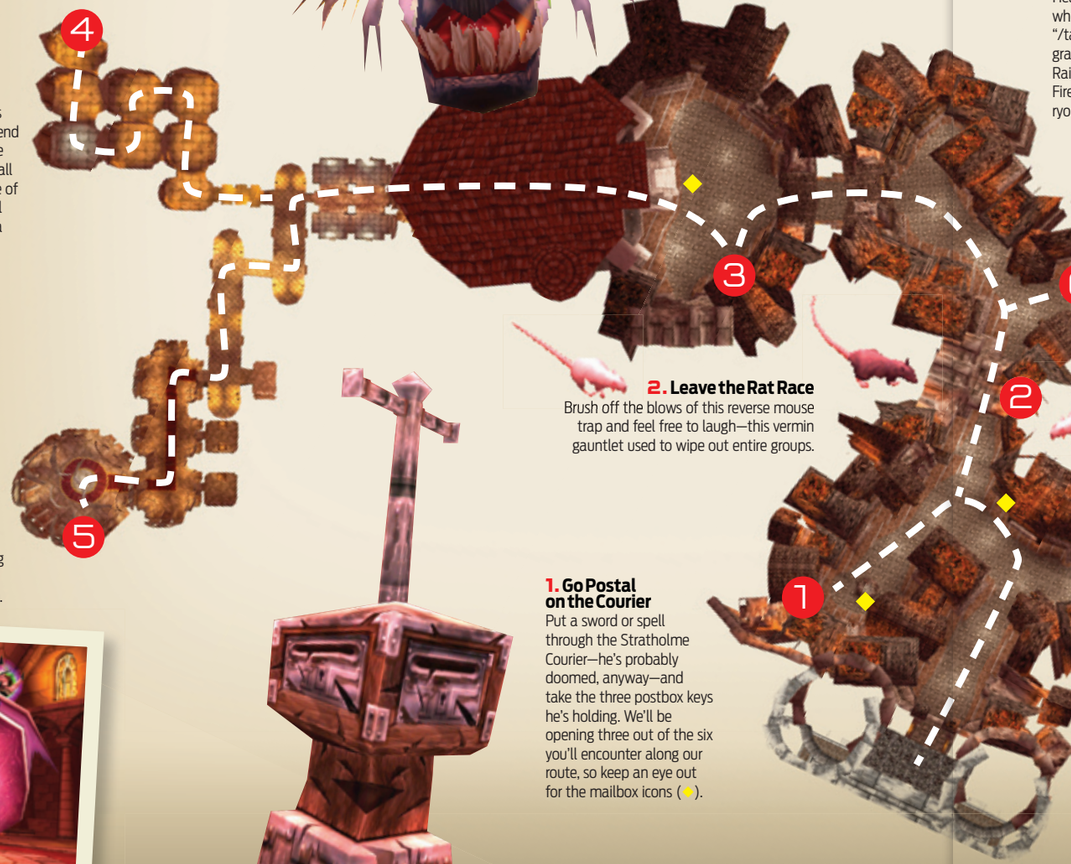
Sacking Stratholme

Scoop up some easy loot in Stratholme with our step-by-step guide—it may be your last chance!

Once one of the hottest spots in Azeroth, nowadays Stratholme is all but deserted. With everything potentially on the chopping block in the upcoming world-shattering *World of Warcraft: Cataclysm* expansion, waning player interest places the entire zone on the endangered list. So it's worth taking an hour for a final tour of Stratholme, which is today easily solo-able with a brawny level 80 character. Along the way you'll find some great pop-culture references, secret bosses and unique pieces of loot that you probably missed the first time around. **JOSH AUGUSTINE**

4. Play Pirate
While crossing cutlasses with Cannon Master Wiley, enemies will continually spawn at the end of the hall. Feel free to use the conveniently placed cannon ball piles and cannons to take care of them. If you're lucky, Wiley will drop the Cannonball Runner, a trinket that summons a mini cannon of your own.

3. Raze the Dead
Timmy the Cruel—the zombie that yells his own name—jumps you from behind after you clear the area and run toward the cathedral. Whup him.



5. Do a Little Investigative Reporting
Beat down Grand Crusader Dathrohan to half his health to uncover his dirty little secret—but don't kill him too fast or he won't transform or drop any loot (including the Book of the Dead, which summons a skeleton to protect you).

2. Leave the Rat Race
Brush off the blows of this reverse mouse trap and feel free to laugh—this vermin gauntlet used to wipe out entire groups.

1. Go Postal on the Courier
Put a sword or spell through the Stratholme Courier—he's probably doomed, anyway—and take the three postbox keys he's holding. We'll be opening three out of the six you'll encounter along our route, so keep an eye out for the mailbox icons (●).

8. Get Malowned
After you open your third mailbox, the Mailman himself (named and modeled after Karl Malone) will show up to slam on you. All of the loot he drops references the basketball legend, including Malone's Slam—a mace that stuns enemies on impact.

12. Defeat the Bad Guy
If you're extremely lucky, you'll have a chance to snag Ramstein's ultra-rare mount, Rivendare's Charger, which looks similar to the Undead epic racial mounts.

13. Get the Girl
Unless you took a lunch break, you made it in time to save the damsel in distress. And although she doesn't offer any extra loot, at least she wasn't in a different castle.

6. Be Fabulous!
World of Warcraft's suspiciously festive Hearthsinger Forresten will show up somewhere along your path after this point. Use "/tar Hearth" to spot him in the crowd and grab his Woolies of the Prancing Minstrel, Rainbow Girdle, and the Piccolo of Flaming Fire—the infamous trinket that makes everyone around you burst into dance.

11. Kill the Fatties
Clear out the yard of ugly abominations until Ramstein the Gorger shows up to play. Kill him too, and take his Lightning Bolts, a trinket that calls down an area-of-effect lightning attack.

7. Dancing with Ghosts
Declare a cease-fire by offering to /dance with a spectral citizen.

9. Take a Break
The service gate provides a backdoor entrance into the instance. Kill the nearby mutated magistrate for the key and make a pitstop inside the Alonsus chapel.

10. Take Down the Ziggurats
Crush everybody defending the Ziggurats to open the gate to the final boss. While you're there, grab a souvenir skull off-hand item from Maleki the Pallid.

14. Onwards and Upwards
Go to the Caverns of Time and run the Culling of Stratholme instance with a group to see how Arthas and a few demons turned a charming hamlet into the bombed-out monster-infested hellhole you just purged.

The Cruel Faces of Mankind

Three ways to die a horrible death in **Face of Mankind** (and have fun while doing it)

After a traumatic debut that included a month of devastating denial-of-service attacks and the loss of a publisher, futuristic first- and third-person MMORPG *Face of Mankind* is back, and in open beta. My own brief flirtation with the game years ago introduced me to players who created their own roles and societies as thugs, merchants and law-enforcing cops, so I was eager to rediscover *Face*'s sci-fi frontier world. Its developers gave me 10 clones (lives) to start out with, but not long afterward I realized I was going to need many, many more. **JOSH AUGUSTINE**

1. POLICE BRUTALITY

I begin in New York City as a diplomat wearing meticulously chosen footwear: There are eight times as many options for shoes as there are for skin color.

A man hurtles past me with two armed guards in pursuit. Then, with two shots to the back, he's gunned down in the street. I follow the guards at a safe distance; I'm led to a gathering of police officers.

The cops have an unarmed player pinned against the wall. One accuses the man of being part of a rebel organization. Someone fires, then a barrage of bullets slams his dead body against the wall.

2. SPONTANEOUS GANG WARS

By refining mined resources into sellable products, I'm able to purchase an apartment in Tokyo. To avoid any incidents like I witnessed earlier, I change my allegiance to the law enforcement faction.

As I exit my apartment, four people sprint past me. Not wanting to miss out on the excitement, I fall in line and sprint along a path, through a night club, and around a corner...

...straight into the middle of a shoot-out. Cops from my faction try to protect me, but we're outnumbered by rivals in a turf war. I take three shots to my sweater vest, which has unsatisfying protective value.

3. MAFIA HITMEN

Tired of the urban lifestyle and its tendency to end at the business end of a laser pistol, I flee to a remote mining colony to search for lucrative sources of minerals to improve my business. I stumble across two shady-looking guys who don't respond to my greetings.

I walk between them, down the long, deserted walkway they were guarding. At the end, one man sits silently at a table. Hoping to make a friend who can help me get started mining on the planet, I say hello and sit down. No response.

After awhile, the man slowly looks to his right. I follow his gaze just in time to see a gun and the name "Silent Assassin" materialize before I take a solid hit to the chest. The last thing I see is the hitman's stoic face watching my body crumple to the floor in front of him.

MMO BITS

Up next: Cataclysm

Patch 3.3, the last major content update to be released before the forthcoming *Cataclysm* expansion, hit live servers, giving players the chance to finally face off with the Lich King. In a break from past raid dungeons, the Icecrown Citadel's bosses are being released in small groups over time to extend the experience for raiders who have a history of completing and growing bored with new dungeons in about 48 hours.

Not every galactic citizen is created equal

Cadets who pre-ordered *Star Trek Online* will be taking with them to the final frontier one of several unique items, depending on where they bought the game. Bonuses ranged from nirvana (Gamestop allows you to command the USS Enterprise) to practical but dull (Wal-Mart hands you a bonus skill points package). Still no word yet on a Coconut Monkey bridge officer, but we remain hopeful.

Carrying the torch

Runic Games revealed that "the basic gameplay mechanics, the visual style, and the world" of *Torchlight* will be transplanted directly into the MMO (isometric camera, click-to-move, etc.), but everything else is open to change. In particular, the plan is to increase the number of locations, classes, and visual appearance options for characters. While currently planning a free-to-play model, Runic notes that the plans might change by the time the game is released in an estimated two years.

It's that time of the year again

Last month, an untold number of digital denizens donned their gay apparel, dropping bloody swords and battered helmets in favor of anything bright red or sparkly green, preferably with oversized antlers or bells attached. NPCs were relieved to have a brief respite from their usual genocide as gamers instead spent their time exchanging presents, drinking eggnog, and sitting on a fat man's knee. Despite the peace, love and harmony displayed, one thing was still under attack all season long: fashion.

Epic loot of the month

Shadowmourne, 2-handed axe
***World of Warcraft*, Icecrown Citadel**

In addition to ridiculously high damage, each hit with this cursed axe has a chance to drain the soul of your enemy, granting you their strength. After you've stolen 10 soul fragments, you unleash delicious shadow damage to all enemies around you.

Serious Business

How do developers strike a balance between profit and artistry? Former *Diablo* Lead Designer **DAVE BREVIK** shares his wisdom

Bounced paychecks sparked my first lesson in the games industry. I was fresh out of college—creating a game with two other developers and some management. Several months into development, into executing what we thought were idealistic, innovative, and couldn't-fail ideas, we ran out of money. There are countless nuggets of wisdom that I accumulated in my many years of PC design, coding and management experience, but none more important than this: "Making games is a business."

It's difficult to say this because I consider myself a game-making artist at heart, but there is a very delicate balance between the art and business sides of making games—our true yin and yang. The designer in me would give away everything I do because I am not motivated by money. I have a passion for making games. I want to entertain people through games and spread gaming joy. Unfortunately, the force of this desire alone doesn't pay the bills. There is a reason the phrase "starving artist" exists. If we are going to really be able to create our artworks, we need to consider and balance it with financial sensibility and with a realistic outlook of what the market wants. The best games combine them into a whole.

Finding this balance between art and business is a very difficult process. If you focus solely on the artistic side of game-making, it oftentimes means that you will never finish. You will never finish because a game could take forever if you have endless amounts of money. Since most of us don't have that luxury, there is a very real money deadline. In fact, you may end up not finishing because you ran out of money. Ensuring that you can squeeze all of your best-laid plans into this time line creates the balance your project will need. It helps both the artist and the business.

If you focus on the business side, you'll likely nickel-and-dime your customers. Many times I have found myself debating with business-oriented developers who want to add on top of what already exists. The phrase "leave money on the table" gets dropped into these conversations faster than a *StarCraft* match between me and a professional Korean gamer. Just adding more things to buy on top of a base doesn't mean that the gamers will go for it. In fact, I find that there is a very real perceived value that a discerning consumer will evaluate. If you don't create something of value, the gamers will rise up and paint that scarlet "A" on your game. That means it's game-over before it even starts.

My first game ideas—oh, how I thought they were the best game ideas in the world! Looking back, I'm sure that all 12 people who would have bought those games would have loved them. Considering and analyzing the size of your audience is vital. To really create a game that makes money (which means that you might have a chance at making more games) you need a sizeable audience. An audience willing to pay you more than it cost to make the game. As it turns out, the people that fund game development want more money in return. Shocking!

In the end, everyone wants their games to succeed. Finding the balance between our pure artistic game concept and the realities of business will be the only way to create the complete circle of yin and yang.

If we are going to really be able to create our artworks, we need to consider and balance it with ... a realistic outlook of what the market wants.

David Brevik

Title
Studio Director, Gazillion Entertainment

Previously
President of Blizzard North; Director at Turbine

Worked on
Diablo, *Diablo II* (Lead Designer, Lead Programmer), co-creator, Battle.net

Favorite Things
Marvel, MMOs, tabletop games, baseball, LEGO

What Dave's playing now
Super Mario Wii, *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance*, *The Beatles: Rock Band*

On Diablo ...

Favorite class
Barbarian

Favorite loot
Civerb's Cudgel

What were Blizzard's early days like?
"A few months before we shipped *Diablo II*, we tried removing all of the absurd loot in the game to make drops feel more realistic. No longer would that bat drop a halberd and plate legs, they would drop body parts that matched what type of monster it was. In the end, it became a very gruesome game because the monsters were dropping hearts, eyes and other parts. Quite a few employees that felt that we should have left the body parts in and for weeks there were "Keep the body parts" signs all over the office.

Crysis' elegant engine is the best possible venue for mech warfare.

Outdoing the Devs

Modders are beating the big studios to the punch with first-class adaptations

We've walked out of so many great action movies thinking "Now, there's a game we'd like to play." And just as many times some developer actually made the game, and dashed our hopes against the sharp and deadly rocks of **FAIL** with dull and unimaginative adaptations. Luckily, the PC modding community is too big to take such affronts lying down. Here, four groups take on the *Star Trek, Star Wars* and *MechWarrior* universes.

Galactic Warfare

The project began with a single blaster model, but before you could say "No! Alderaan is peaceful!" it became a complete and breathtakingly detailed *Star Wars* mod for *Call of Duty 4*, complete with stormtroopers, X-wing bombing runs, and thermal detonator spam galore. The beta will launch soon with a Tatooine map, but beware: The download site is entirely in German. ***www.blackmonkeys.de***

Sacrifice of Angels 2

Forget the agony of *Star Trek: Armada*. *Sacrifice of Angels 2* does *Star Trek* tactics the *right* way using the *Sins of a Solar Empire* engine. Control the Federation, Klingons, Romulans, Dominion or even the all-singing, all-dancing Borg as you attempt to negotiate and battle your way to control of the galaxy. ***http://www.moddb.com/mods/star-trek-sacrifice-of-angels-2***

Sins of a Galactic Empire

Why have so many *Star Wars* RTS games taken place on the ground? Now you can create proper, space-based *Star Wars* dogfights using the Empire, Alliance, Republic or CIS. Running on the *SoaSE* engine, *Sins of a Galactic Empire* lets you conquer planets, drain resources and make negotiations just like you always have, only now you can do it with X-Wings. Much better. ***http://www.moddb.com/mods/sins-of-a-galactic-empire***

MechWarrior: Living Legends

In what may be the most perfect matchup since PB met J, the missile-spitting MadCats and Timberwolves of *MechWarrior* meet the oh-so-shiny CryEngine 2 in *MechWarrior: Living Legends*. The capture point–based gameplay blends in FPS and simulation elements, and you play not only as Mechs, but also on foot and in tanks and other vehicles as well. Count us in. ***www.mechlivinglegends.net***

We hope the *Galactic Empire* mod includes its own version of *Call of Duty*'s killstreaks. We'd love to call in a TIE fighter airstrike.

release meter 0310

WHAT YOU'LL BE PLAYING

For an ancient Mayan shaman, a false prediction of next year's crop yield was the quickest way to get gutted by the spear of the tribe chieftain. We hold our release dates in the same regard: gutting rumor and speculation to bleed the lies from our clan and allow truth to prosper.

Q1 2010

Aliens vs. Predator	Sega
Assassin's Creed II	Ubisoft
Battlefield: Bad Company 2	EA
BioShock 2	2K
Command & Conquer 4	EA
Global Agenda	Hi-Rez Studios
Just Cause 2	Eidos
Lead and Gold: Gangs of the Wild West	Paradox
Mafia II	2K
Napoleon: Total War	Sega
R.U.S.E.	Ubisoft
Serious Sam HD: The Second Encounter	Gotham
Singularity	Activision
Sins of a Solar Empire: Diplomacy	Stardock
Splinter Cell: Conviction	Ubisoft
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Call of Pripyat	BitComposer
Star Trek Online	Atari
Super Meat Boy	Team Meat
Supreme Commander 2	Square Enix
Warhammer 40,000 Dawn of War II: Chaos Rising	THQ

LATER 2010

Alpha Protocol ▲	Sega
APB	EA
Arma II: Operation Arrowhead	IDEA Games
Battlefield 1943	EA
Brink	Bethesda
Crysis 2	EA
DeathSpank	Hothead
Deus Ex 3	Eidos
Elemental: War of Magic	Stardock
Fallout: New Vegas	Bethesda
Homefront	THQ
Left 4 Dead 2: The Passing DLC	Valve
Max Payne 3	Rockstar
Metro 2033	THQ
Rage	Bethesda Softworks
Red Orchestra: Heroes of Stalingrad	TBD
Ride to Hell	Deep Silver
Split/Second	Disney Interactive
StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty	Blizzard
Star Wars: The Old Republic	EA
World of Warcraft: Cataclysm	Blizzard

Keep an eye on your base or you may find it engulfed in flames.

A CUNNING PLAN

R.U.S.E. promises genuine battle strategy on a massive scale. Or is it a trick?

It's a little weird to be saying that a *camera system* is our favorite aspect of a strategy game. But alas, *R.U.S.E.* is a grand spectacle of technology—if the source code for Google Earth had a sexy romp with *Company of Heroes* or any other Hitler-era RTS, it might look something like this.

Your default view is a tabletop, but a roll of the mousewheel zooms to reveal gunnery crews loading shells. Pull the camera out and you'll see your units stack into Risk-style poker chip counters, ready to be shuffled around the sectors of the map at your whim.

READ ME
PUBLISHER Ubisoft
DEVELOPER Ubisoft
LINK www.rusegame.com
RELEASE Jan-Mar 2010

This distance from the conflict affords *R.U.S.E.* its key conceit: the ability to use sneaky tricks in the form of title-tastic "ruses." Each ruse on offer reveals the intentions of a far-distant enemy, or covers your own scurrilous tracks as you concoct a scheme. Matches begin with access to a set number of "ruse cards" that can be played at any time in set sectors of the map. Time and success in battle refill your haul and you can play several cards at once, but they're valuable things, able to win a battle when used well. A foe smashed to a stalemate by an assault, for example, can be tipped into surrender with careful manipulation of the intelligence he has at his disposal.

Up until now, we only had a vague concept of how deception and perspective would be worked in. But after a month in the multiplayer beta, we're ready to present the results of our scheming strategy. Flip the page for a full report of our first battle. **RICH MCCORMICK**

Two Sides to Every War Story Three ruses support your plans

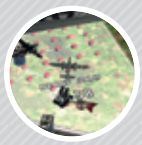
DEFEND

Incoming foes! Use the nets to hide your turrets and swat the nasties down before they get too close to your territory.

Camouflage Net

Obscure your forward base and create a rolling barrage of offensive artillery. Your enemy won't know what hit them.

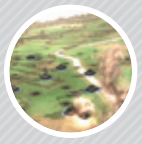
ATTACK



Are the baddies converging on your position? Try tossing out some toy tanks for them to waste their precious ammo on.

Decoy Units

Panic is the best friend of mega-victory. Bolstering your army with fake additions will leave your opponent's pants pee-stained.



Control important chokepoints by hiding a squad of fully tooled-up soldiers under a toasty blanket of radio silence.

Radio Silence

Covering a nearby sector with radio silence makes it an ideal staging point for an assault. All you need to do is lie in wait.

R.U.S.E. BATTLE REPORT

The tricks, twists and tanks of our first multiplayer game

by Rich McCormick & Tom Francis

1 WAR DECLARED
Tom Francis (Germany): My first strategy is to go nuts on supply depots without spending a penny on defense. I also skip tanks and go straight to aircraft, so I can get to his units with the element of surprise. After building a few fighter-bombers, I send them after his unidentified units.
Rich McCormick (Great Britain): The matches I've played beforehand have been heavy with sky-bastards, so I'm well aware of the need for anti-air defenses. I cleverly splurge my early budget on some flak and sit there, panicking.

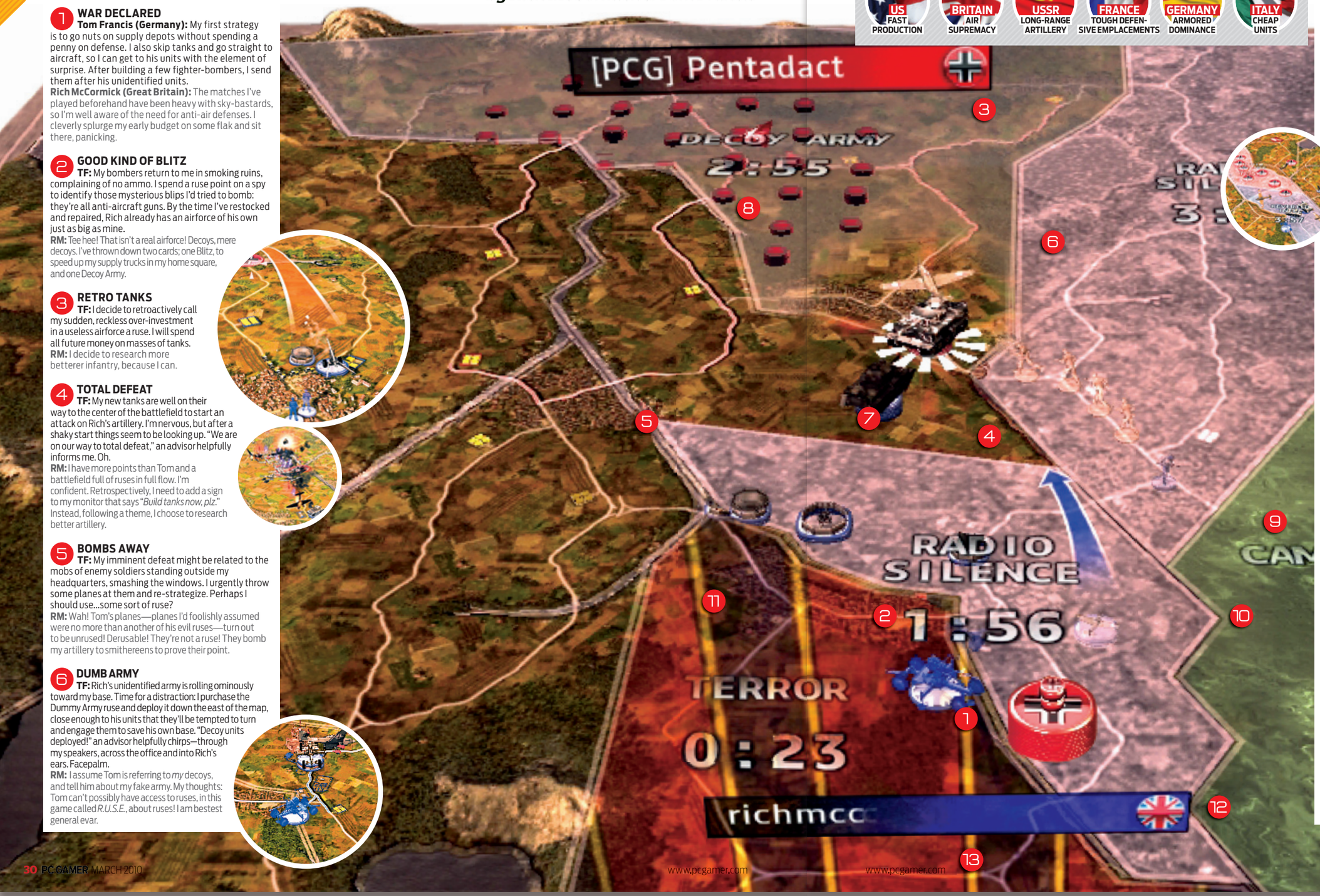
2 GOOD KIND OF BLITZ
TF: My bombers return to me in smoking ruins, complaining of no ammo. I spend a ruse point on a spy to identify those mysterious blips I'd tried to bomb: they're all anti-aircraft guns. By the time I've restocked and repaired, Rich already has an airforce of his own just as big as mine.
RM: Tee hee! That isn't a real airforce! Decoys, mere decoys. I've thrown down two cards; one Blitz, to speed up my supply trucks in my home square, and one Decoy Army.

3 RETRO TANKS
TF: I decide to retroactively call my sudden, reckless over-investment in a useless airforce a ruse. I will spend all future money on masses of tanks.
RM: I decide to research more betterer infantry, because I can.

4 TOTAL DEFEAT
TF: My new tanks are well on their way to the center of the battlefield to start an attack on Rich's artillery. I'm nervous, but after a shaky start things seem to be looking up. "We are on our way to total defeat," an advisor helpfully informs me. Oh.
RM: I have more points than Tom and a battlefield full of ruses in full flow. I'm confident. Retrospectively, I need to add a sign to my monitor that says "*Build tanks now, plz.*" Instead, following a theme, I choose to research better artillery.

5 BOMBS AWAY
TF: My imminent defeat might be related to the mobs of enemy soldiers standing outside my headquarters, smashing the windows. I urgently throw some planes at them and re-strategize. Perhaps I should use...some sort of ruse?
RM: Wah! Tom's planes—planes I'd foolishly assumed were no more than another of his evil ruses—turn out to be unrused! Derusable! They're not a ruse! They bomb my artillery to smithereens to prove their point.

6 DUMB ARMY
TF: Rich's unidentified army is rolling ominously toward my base. Time for a distraction: I purchase the Dummy Army ruse and deploy it down the east of the map, close enough to his units that they'll be tempted to turn and engage them to save his own base. "Decoy units deployed!" an advisor helpfully chirps—through my speakers, across the office and into Rich's ears. Facepalm.
RM: I assume Tom is referring to *my* decoys, and tell him about my fake army. My thoughts: Tom can't possibly have access to ruses, in this game called *R.U.S.E.*, about ruses! I am bestest general evar.

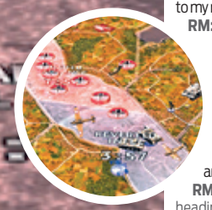


League of Nations

While America is the only side available in the single-player campaign, six countries will be playable in multiplayer. Here's a snap-breakdown of their best traits.

7 BRAINS OVER BRAWN
TF: "What? No, they're not decoys!" says Rich. Huh? I mean yes, no, not decoys! I'm glad you think so. Wait, what's going on?
It takes me a second to figure it all out: *his* units are decoys. He thought my troops were informing me that they'd discovered this. They hadn't. But has my reaction to his reaction given away that *mine* are decoys? He isn't reacting to them in any way. But then, if his units are decoys, too, he wouldn't send them after my units whether he thought they were decoys or not.
I decide that both our armies are imaginary, and that parts of my base are on fire. I return to my tank-heavy strategy.
RM: My ambitious strategy of researching everything I can for no real reason continues apace. My gigantic knowledge-o-brain will definitely bring me certain victory—I don't need any form of offensive capability!
I use a ruse card, Spy, that reveals some of Tom's units in a sector worryingly close to mine. Ah. Hm. Eek. Tanks.

8 SCARY CONFUSION
TF: The Decoy Army ruse gives your factories the ability to create decoy units. I did this unwittingly, but, shrugging, I add them to my real tanks to make my army scarier and more confusing.
RM: I'm more scared and confused. Artillery! Build artillery!



9 EAST SIDE STORY
TF: I send a decoy tank down the east side of the map as a possible diversion. I want him to think my large, real force is a distraction for this small, fake force to reach his base. It's not. It's just a lot of tanks heading straight down the middle of the map for all to see. But in a sense, isn't that another, cleverer, meta-ruse?
RM: I've set up a small ambush in the town Tom's mini-force is heading toward, using an infantry unit hiding in the city square. Tee hee! If his tank comes into the city, my grenadiers will launch a surprise assault and pop it like a superheated tin can! It doesn't.

10 TANK GAMBIT
TF: I suddenly realize that the tank I split off is a real one, my best one, and it has destroyed much of his defenses. Wow. It was a ruse so cunning I even rused myself.
RM: Out of cash, thanks to my artillery (seriously, you should see my artillery—it's dead good), I have no realistic way to counter Tom's daring gambit of sending a single tank.

11 LOST CITY
TF: I'm nervous. I can't *find* Rich's units. There are only five minutes left, so I send everything to his main base. A moment later, I can no longer find it. There's a "camouflage building" ability—has he used that, or did I destroy it unnaturally quickly?
RM: Yeah, not a proud moment for me. The reason Tom can't find my units is because they're either a) hiding in some trees, or b) on fire. Even my artillery is a bit dead.

12 DEPOTS RUN DRY
TF: I've let my supply depots run dry without capturing any new ones, and I'm out of money. If Rich's disappearing act is a ruse, I have nothing left to recover from a counter-strike and no time.
RM: I camouflage all of my buildings in key sectors and bring my surviving units into the safety of some woods.

13 WAR IS OVER
TF: The timer ticks down and I realize that my score has become pretty good. My advisor says, "We are on our way to total victory!" Oh, well done, Mr. Total Defeat. Changed your tune, have you? Clearly, nothing can possibly go wrong.
RM: Or can it? I send my swarm of units from the treeline into the soft belly of Tom's unsuspecting units! The chaos, the disarray, the sheer balls I display in doing such a thing! The swarm is two AA guns, and Tom quickly cuts them down with his heavy tanks. Man, Tom, weren't medium tanks enough?
No, apparently they weren't. My last-ditch attack has been crushed. The timer is down to zero. I've lost.

WINNER: TOM FRANCIS Germany
As we say in the Reich, all things must come to an end—only the sausage has two. Auf wiedersehen!

The minx with the mink cap is a Trapper, a sniping class that can also lay invisible bear traps.

In Prospector's Peak, attackers break open entrances to a mine by rolling kegs of gunpowder up to three barred-up doors.

GOLD RUSHING!

We dig our spurs into LEAD AND GOLD: GANGS OF THE WILD WEST

I'm carrying a bag filled with gold. My team is plundering a mine, and I'm the point man—lugging burlap-wrapped bullion back to a capture point in our base. My teammate is a desperado, and he's yelling at me from beneath his face bandana to hurry the hell up.

"Throw the gold!" he hollers. I'm trying. It's heavy—in 1850s money, maybe $500 worth—and my foot speed is twice as slow when I'm holding the bag. I left-click and toss the purse forward, letting it tumble at my teammate's feet while my shotgun is automatically re-equipped. I turn around my grizzled Blaster, the most bearded of *Lead and Gold*'s four character classes, and toss a stick of dynamite to cover our escape. The fuse fizzles. Bullets are whizzing by us left and right. I turn the corner and a Gunslinger is there palm-slapping the hammer on his six-shooter. Farther up the trail, our Deputy is yelling for help—he's got his foot caught in a bear trap and can't move. Our gold is in danger, and half my team is bleeding out in the hot Arizona dust.

In moments like this, *Lead and Gold* is pure, unadulterated frontier bliss. It takes a familiar western theme with built-in dangers and thrills—relaying a giant pouch of precious metal like a rugby ball, quick-rolling through dust to dodge buckshot while 19th-century sniper rifles (with their mounted telescopes) try to bring you to justice—and fuses it to objective-focused game modes (there's no deathmatch). The result plays something like *Team Fortress 2* with a looser sense of teamwork.

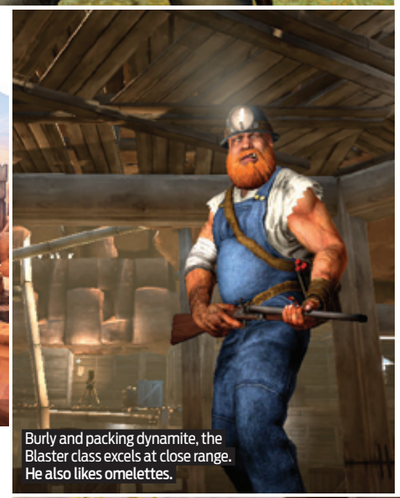
Lead calls its teamwork system "synergy abilities." Each character class has a passive trait that buffs teammates if they're within spitting distance of one another, which provides an easily understood incentive for sticking with your compadres. Run and gun near a Trapper—*Lead*'s raccoon-capped sniper—and you'll have a higher chance of doing critical hits; hang with a Blaster, and you'll have a scratch more damage resistance. Synergy abilities level up within the context of a session (but not persistently across multiple matches), so racking up kills or completing objectives boosts their effectiveness.

Farther up the trail, our Deputy is yelling for help—he's got his foot caught in a bear trap...

READ ME
PUBLISHER Paradox Interactive
DEVELOPER Fatshark
LINK www.leadandgold.com
RELEASE Jan-Mar 2010

The Gunslinger class twirls dual revolvers.

Wooden bridges and ramps connect the areas of *L&G*'s maps, giving them a great variety of elevated spots to attack from.


Burly and packing dynamite, the Blaster class excels at close range. He also likes omelettes.

There's a bit of MMO sensibility to this design—but *Lead*'s shooter cred is absolutely legitimate: Even as a six-map, four-mode package (with likely more to come as DLC), it plays, looks and feels better than its measly ($15) price tag. Bright lighting energizes the game's well-animated western art; the third-person controls are precise; shooting a Winchester isn't boring (as it never should be). And at the end of the day, there's a mode where your opponents scamper with gunpowder-filled barrels to wreck structures, and you can shoot the powder kegs out of your enemies' hands and blow the leathery hats right off their heads. Brilliant.

Expect *Lead* to fill the role of something like *Killing Floor* in 2010—simple, dependable multiplayer action that, even with a minimum of depth, delights in shorter sessions, and will rob you of barely a fingernail's scrape of gold to download. **EVAN LAHTI**

Game objectives: do we actually want them?

We've spent years chasing after flags and capture points without honestly asking ourselves: are they worth sacrificing our lives for?

Gimme gimme!

Bags of gold (*Lead and Gold*) Inherently valuable, and it inspires any number of deep-set prospector fantasies.

Hostages (*Counter-Strike*) Worth saving: Every whining scientist is someone's son.

I'd cap that.

Capture points (*Team Fortress 2*, various) This arbitrary spot meant so much to the Red team, they put a shiny piece of circular metal on it.

Gasoline (*L4D2*, Scavenge mode) The zombies musn't get our fuel. Wait—why are we powering a generator in the middle of the swamp again?

Pass.

Flags (*Tribes*, *Unreal Tournament* series) A towel tied to a pole. Why is *this* in the most-defensible part of our base, and not a pile of wine and cupcakes?

Protect the gold! In multiplayer, Greed mode swaps capture the flag for a bag plump with gold.

LINE IN THE SAND

Is **SPEC OPS: THE LINE** just an arid action game, or something more?

This sand-buried metropolis is one of the first screenshots of *Spec Ops: The Line*, the revival of 2K Games' late-'90s/early-'00s third-person shooter series. On the one hand, a desert-overrun Dubai could be a dazzling and unique environment for a shooter. On the other, everything we've seen so far is the same hide-behind-concrete-walls-and-shoot things action we've played in the past decade. So until we put our goggles on and get some hands-on time with this desert-shooter, we're weighing the pros and cons of all the intel we've received so far. **EVAN LAHTI**

WHOA

▶ *Spec Ops* is a reboot, and is no longer being developed by its original creators, Zombie Studios, whose recent releases include *Saw* (45%, February '09) and the execrable *Rogue Warrior* (25%, p. 85).

▶ Sandstorms have deposited layers of unstable dunes over Dubai, and the sand may shift and react unpredictably to movement and ordnance. Stepping in the wrong place or causing too many explosions can result in havoc, and might even uncover previously obscured structures

▶ There are more than a few connections between *Spec Ops* and novelist Joseph Conrad. The developers are calling Dubai's post-disaster state "the Heart of Darkness," also the title of one of Conrad's novels. Atop that, the man your character is searching for is named John Conrad—and like Conrad's (the author) *Apocalypse Now*, John is a few bullets short of a clip—a Delta Force legendary badass who's gone off the reservation.

UH-OH

▶ "We intend to make *Spec Ops* the most provocative shooter you've ever played." These bold words are Cory Davis', the lead designer at Yager Development, who describes *Spec Ops* as a game flush with "emotionally impactful" choices. But we've yet to see any evidence yet that *Spec Ops* will appeal to our morality the way a decision-based RPG like *Mass Effect* does.

VITALS

PUBLISHER 2K Games

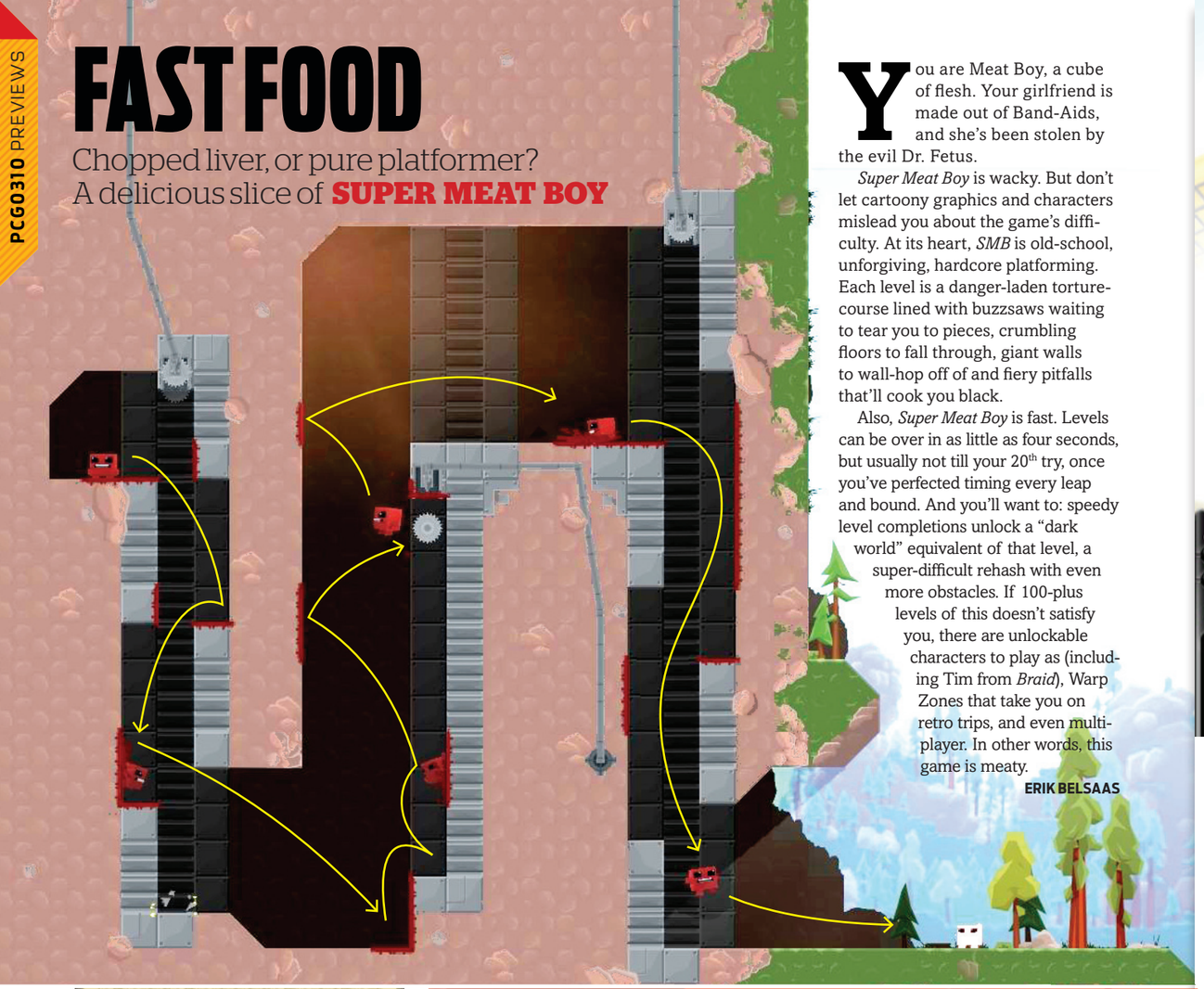
DEVELOPER Yager Development

LINK specopsthe line.com

RELEASE Winter 2010

FAST FOOD

Chopped liver, or pure platformer?
A delicious slice of **SUPER MEAT BOY**

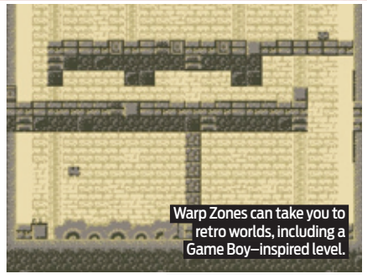


You are Meat Boy, a cube of flesh. Your girlfriend is made out of Band-Aids, and she's been stolen by the evil Dr. Fetus.

Super Meat Boy is wacky. But don't let cartoony graphics and characters mislead you about the game's difficulty. At its heart, *SMB* is old-school, unforgiving, hardcore platforming. Each level is a danger-laden torture-course lined with buzzsaws waiting to tear you to pieces, crumbling floors to fall through, giant walls to wall-hop off of and fiery pitfalls that'll cook you black.

Also, *Super Meat Boy* is fast. Levels can be over in as little as four seconds, but usually not till your 20th try, once you've perfected timing every leap and bound. And you'll want to: speedy level completions unlock a "dark world" equivalent of that level, a super-difficult rehash with even more obstacles. If 100-plus levels of this doesn't satisfy you, there are unlockable characters to play as (including Tim from *Braid*), Warp Zones that take you on retro trips, and even multiplayer. In other words, this game is meaty.

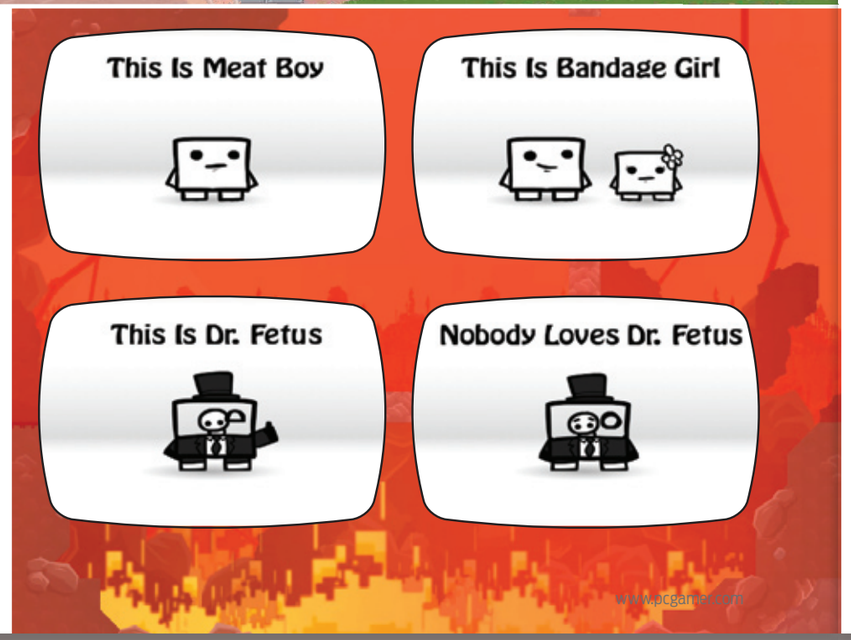
ERIK BELSAAS



Warp Zones can take you to retro worlds, including a Game Boy–inspired level.

VITALS
PUBLISHER Team Meat
DEVELOPER Team Meat
LINK www.supermeatboy.blogspot.com
RELEASE Q1 2010

Buzzsaws are Meat Boy's main enemies. You will get ground up many, many times.



www.pcgamer.com

MAD, UGLY AND DIRTY

Think you can run a TV network better than FOX or NBC? We point our clickers at **M.U.D. TV**

On the top floor of a cartoon office building, renowned bobble-headed thespian Tom Schwarzenegger dashes down the hall. He's been called in for an impromptu shooting of his latest project, "WomBatman," a two-star serial drama I created to appeal to geeks and the elderly. Meanwhile, my program director has snatched an exclusive advertising contract with credit card company MoneySlave to sponsor the program. If WomBatman can score 1.3 million viewers in its Saturday morning time slot, MoneySlave will dump buckets of cash into my account.

This is an average moment in *M.U.D. TV*, a quirky sim from *Tropico 3* creators Kalypso that's ripe with animated tomfoolery. As the program director of new TV station, it's up to you to contract advertising, schedule programming and attract as many viewers to your station as possible while appeasing eight groups of viewers—hippies, emos, housewives, intellectuals, machos, nerds, yuppies and retirees.

You'll have a staff of producers, actors, writers and technicians buzzing around your office to develop movies, shows or TV series to catch the eyes of these demographics. For example, if you've nabbed the rights to run ads for Elvis (a play on Levis) jeans, you might hire a male action star to crank out cheap films to run with them. On weekends, maybe you'll plug Toyoda car commercials alongside your melodramatic soap opera.

Managing a TV station should be full of corporate shenanigans, and we love the way *M.U.D. TV* buys into its playful premise. Pile on co-op play and multiplayer with up to seven opponents (all housed conveniently in the floors below you), and we've got more than a few reasons to step away from our regularly scheduled gaming to play it.

PRENTICE GEDE

VITALS
PUBLISHER Kalypso Media
DEVELOPER Realmforge Studios/ Kalypso Media
LINK www.realmforgestudios.com
RELEASE March 2010

The Office

To be the best network in TV land, you'll need to build an awesome studio to crank out prime programming.

1 **Studio Room** A customizable studio with different sets that can shoot a range of telecasts from *Titanic* rip-offs to Steven Seagal flicks.

2 **Cafeteria** Make sure you have a cafeteria or your starved workers will leave work early.

3 **Science and Research** Craft sabotage items such as a jamming device to disrupt your rivals.

4 **Post-production** Run your telecasts through special effects and extra editing to help them earn a "Semmy" award!

5 **Writing Room** Lock up your writers until they've come up with the next *Lost*.

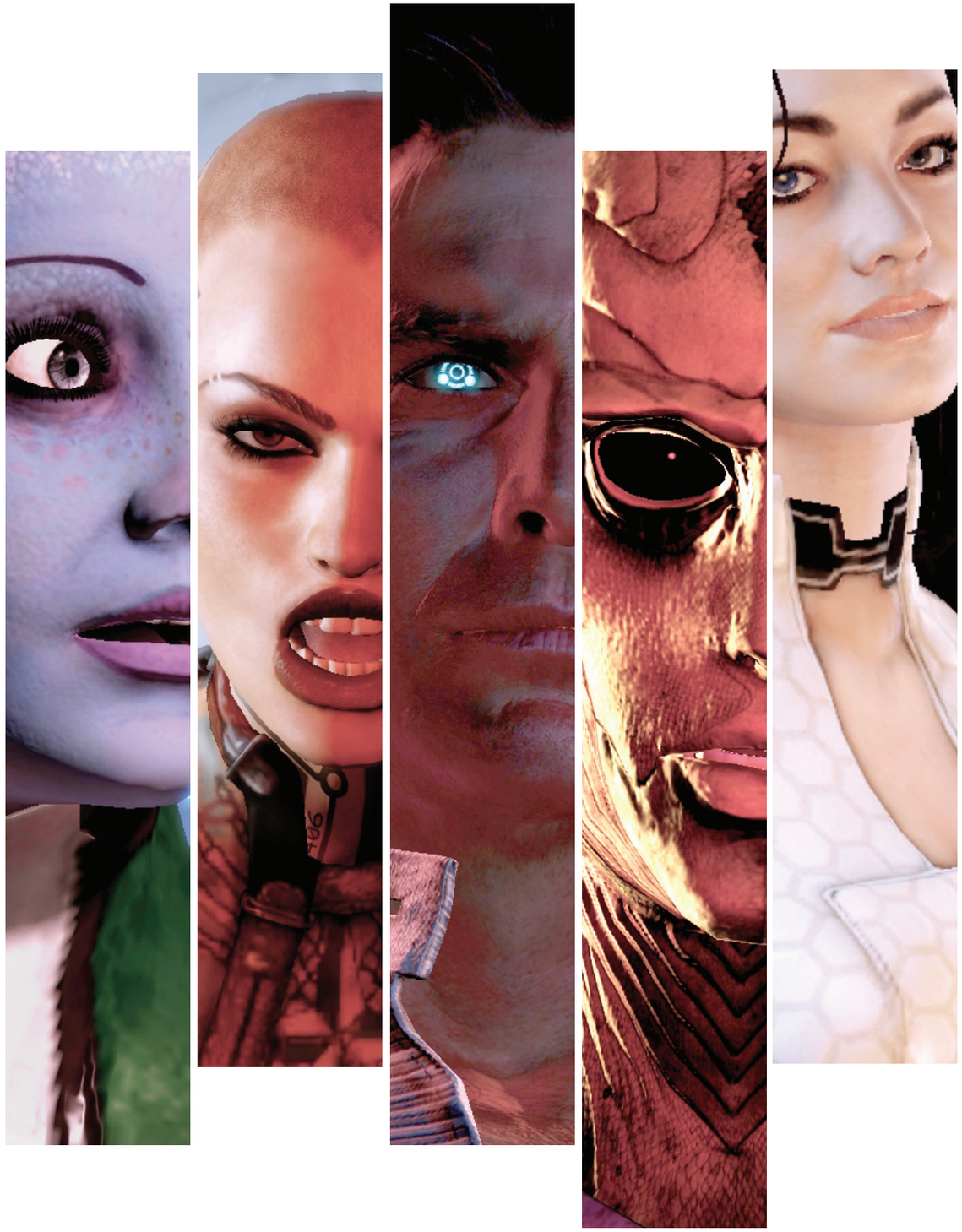
6 **News Room** Create telecasts that vary from hard-hitting reporting to inane punditry.

7 **Cubicle Farm** Secretaries clatter away at their keyboards. The more employees you hire, the more cube farms you'll need.

8 **Program Director's Office** Your personal workstation where you manage the hour-to-hour plan for programming.

9 **Archive** Secure storage for reruns and your finest productions.

10 **"Now Playing"** A live feed of your network. Change channels to check out your competitors.



MASS EFFECT 2

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE ★★★★★

Expert writing and faster action accelerate gaming's most ambitious science fiction epic ***by Dan Stapleton***

It's impossible to discuss *Mass Effect 2* without spoiling parts of the story of *Mass Effect* (91%). There's just no way. So for those of you who haven't played *Mass Effect* and don't want its surprises ruined for you, I have this advice: set this review aside, pull down *ME1* from Steam or the EA Store, play one of the best science fiction role-playing games in PC history and then come back. We'll still be here. Of course, you can have a great experience with *ME2* without completing *ME1*, but it'd be like watching *The Empire Strikes Back* without first watching *Star Wars*. In other words, it's science fiction heresy.

The second episode of this grand space-opera story has everything needed to grab sci-fi fans for 30-plus hours and still leave them wanting more—interesting heroes, a frightening villain, explosive action where the two meet, a world-class musical score and (for those inclined to investigate) thoughtful philosophical debate on whether the ends justify the means, even when faced with an apocalyptic threat. Oh, and it's a fantastic *game*, too.

Strange bedfellows

After some introductory fireworks, Commander [Your Name Here] Shepard wakes up two years after the defeat of Saren and Sovereign. He finds himself (or herself, but for the sake of brevity, let's just assume a male character) with a scarred face and engaged in a reluctant alliance with the Illusive Man (capably voiced by *The West Wing*'s Martin Sheen), the brains behind the ominously named human-supremacist group Cerberus, which appeared as a minor adversary in *ME1*. Setting out to investigate the mysterious abduction of thousands of human colonists, Shepard must build a new team of specialists to take on the Reapers' latest attempt to consume all sentient life in the galaxy. The quest leads to (among other places) the ruined homeworld of the Krogans and the nomadic fleet home of the Quarians, reveals more about the cultures of the Asari and the Geth, and uncovers the terrible fate of the ancient species that built the mass relay network that allows instant interstellar travel.

System shock

BioWare obviously listened to criticisms of *ME1*, and took a battle axe to aspects of the game that didn't work. Don't expect more interminable elevator rides, for example—they've been replaced with good old-fashioned loading screens. And you won't be doing any driving (except in some DLC that EA says to expect after launch) this time around.

Those changes are small space-potatoes, relatively speaking. The moment the cover-based third-person shooter action begins—which is almost immediately—RPG fans will get whacked with a shocker: You no longer have an inventory. It's been replaced by a more abstract system that wouldn't be out of place in a pure action game.

You no longer have an inventory. It's been replaced by a more abstract system that wouldn't be out of place in a pure action game.

BYO SHEPARD Continue your adventure

If you happen to have your saved games from *ME1* (check in My Documents\BioWare) you can import them to *ME2* and play as the same character, complete with the history of the choices you made in the first game (but not your level and powers). For those continuing their saga, the ability to pick up where you left off is an excellent feature that connects the two episodes in a very impactful way. It makes me feel a little sorry for all those who will miss out on it. Amusingly, starting up a fresh game without loading a save will assume that Shepard was a jerk who let the Council die and killed Wrex.

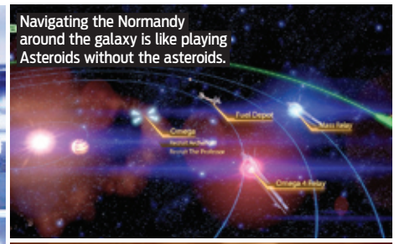
game: Instead of loot drops and containers full of equipable gear, you find "technology" pickups that can be researched on your ship, the Normandy, to unlock new weapons that can be equipped at the start of a mission, improve weapon power or increase damage resistances. New suits of armor are out, but you can customize the appearance of your suit to reflect new tech unlocks at your private terminal. Also gone: equipment mods, replaced by castable abilities that enable ammo types like incendiary, freeze and shock. The upside of this overhaul is that the miserably clunky inventory system of *ME1* is no longer a distraction—although the new weapon loadout and research interfaces aren't all that great, either.

The good fight

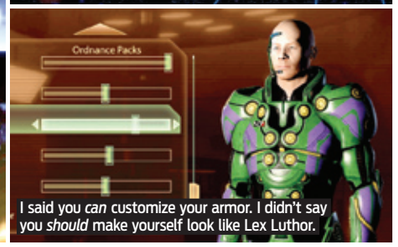
Once you stop expecting hardcore RPG gear management and settle into the simplified action, *ME2*'s combat offers good depth and a faster pace. Thanks to some entertaining abilities, firefights are more interesting than simply ducking in and out of cover and waiting for the enemy to reload. In one gun battle I was pinned down behind cover by heavy weapons fire, so after depleting the attacking mercenary's personal shield I paused and ordered my adept squadmate, Jacob, to cast his Biotic Pull power. The merc was lifted off his feet and began to float slowly and helplessly toward me. My other squad member, science-nerd Mordin, took initiative and used his tech power to freeze that sucker solid. So when I popped up to finish him off with a few incendiary rounds from my heavy pistol, he shattered mid-air, shattering the floating merc-pop into a merc-slushy on the floor.

Shepard can effectively use any type of gun you like regardless of character class (the choice of Vanguard, Soldier, Engineer, Infiltrator or Adept governs your special abilities and hitpoints), freeing you up to use the right tool for the job at hand. Although your squadmates have distinguished AI, you can still pause mid-battle to order them around using a slick, streamlined new interface that's designed for the mouse and keyboard. Mind you, the click-and-drag aiming in pause mode is a little wonky, and you must use appropriate weapons and abilities to counter different enemy defenses.

"Biotics" is *Mass Effect*–speak for "The Force." Watch out for glowy blue stuff.



Navigating the Normandy around the galaxy is like playing Asteroids without the asteroids.



I said you *can* customize your armor. I didn't say you *should* make yourself look like Lex Luthor.

PREVIOUSLY, ON MASS EFFECT How your *ME1* choices shape events in *ME2*

1 Commander Shepard witnesses Saren betraying and murdering his fellow Specter during a Geth attack on the Eden Prime colony. Shepard touches an ancient artifact left by an extinct race and receives indecipherable visions.

2 The Council names Shepard the first human Specter, grants him command of the SSV Normandy and sends him after Saren.

3 Shepard learns that Saren has been corrupted by his sentient ship, Sovereign, which turns out to be an ancient living machine called a Reaper.

4 Saren is breeding an army of Krogan warriors; Shepard's Krogan ally Urgnot Wrex attempts to stop him from destroying the breeding facility.

EITHER Kill Wrex **OR** Talk him down

5 In order to destroy Saren's base, someone must stay behind to detonate the bomb.

Sacrifice **EITHER** Kaidan **OR** Ashley

6 Through a second artifact, Shepard learns that the Citadel space station itself is actually a device that summons the Reapers back to our galaxy.

7 Saren, Sovereign and the Geth fleet attack the Citadel. The Council members attempt to escape the battle in a ship.

EITHER save the Council **OR** Order the fleet to attack Sovereign directly, sacrificing the Council.

8 Saren is killed, possessed by Sovereign and then killed again. Sovereign is destroyed.

9 If the Council lives, humans earn a seat on it. If the Council perishes, humans step up to lead the new Council. Shepard is asked to recommend someone.

Pick **EITHER** noble Captain Anderson **OR** selfish Ambassador Udina.

Seth Green reprises his role as Joker, the Normandy's pilot and Chief Comic Relief Officer; *Battlestar Galactica*'s Tricia Helfer joins the crew as the voice of the ship's AI, EDI.

"Duck and cover" is no more effective against assassins than it is against nuclear strikes.

The writing is top-notch, further fleshing out the universe by letting us explore more deeply into aspects of *Mass Effect*'s web of tense inter-species relations.

In character

But while BioWare has reduced the amount of RPG chocolate in the action peanut butter, the role-playing experience in *Mass Effect 2* is as good as ever—which is to say, spectacularly good. Unless you're really rushing through, the majority of gameplay hours are spent chatting and calling the shots, helping Shepard talk his way out of dangerous situations and into a few pairs of sexy, form-fitting pants.

And this is where BioWare excels. The writing is top-notch, further fleshing out the universe established in the first game by letting us explore more deeply into aspects of *Mass Effect*'s web of tense inter-species relations only hinted at before, and adding to the population of faceted, convincing characters. Best of all, the numerous ethically nebulous situations make you pause before making decisions and taking action, as you can count on having to reckon with the consequences later.

Where *Mass Effect* had six companion characters that could join Shepard's squad, *ME2* nearly doubles that number to 10. It's almost too many—given the way the game all but forces you to swap them out like Tiger Woods swaps out mistresses, it comes dangerously close to making them feel disposable. But each of them has two character-specific missions—one to recruit them to the team and one optional personal mission that exposes their backstories and unlocks a special skill and new outfit—and once you become enmeshed in their histories, you can't help but become attached to at least some of them. Some of the best of the ethical dilemmas are found in the optional missions; the reoccurring theme of the sins of family members makes each of the companions much more three dimensional and sympathetic, and that much more difficult to consider sending them to their deaths, no matter what the mission. I highly recommend doing all of these missions if you have the time—passing up even one robs you of the complete and magnificent experience that is *Mass Effect 2*.

THE NEW CLASS

All of Shepard's companions are interesting characters, but some distinguish themselves more than others. Here's a non-spoilery sampling of the best and worst of the crowd.

Professor Mordin Solus: A
Mordin's distinctive abridged cadence mirrors his to-the-point style. He doesn't hesitate to take the most logical course of action, whether that means using lethal force or engineering a plague for the greater good.

Thane Krios: B+
Conversations with this assassin delve into the philosophy of his work and the plight of his nearly extinct people. At any moment he can slip into a trance-like poetic recounting of one of his many hits—a side effect of his perfect memory.

Miranda Lawson: C
A genetically engineered prodigy loyal to Cerberus. Her dialogue is flatly delivered by *Chuck* actress Yvonne Strahovski. On the other hand, she looks and sounds like Yvonne Strahovski—and she's "romanceable."

Talk the talk

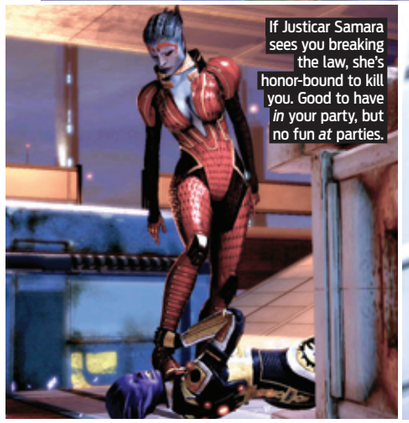
How you handle the dilemmas and situations that confront your characters has a direct effect on your options in future problems. The "charm" and "intimidate" skills that unlocked special conversation options in the first game have been melded into the Paragon/Renegade system, which now unlocks options based on how much of a swell guy or jerk you've been. It's a tweak that rewards role-players and enforces some level of character consistency—a player who has been shooting first and asking questions at the funeral does not have the special option of turning around and talking down a crazed shooter without bloodshed.

A clever addition puts a little more action into the talky parts. Every so often, a mouse icon appears in the bottom corner of the screen during a cut-scene; clicking will cause Shepard to leap into dramatic action. The Renegade actions are typically more fun, and hard for even the most upstanding of Paragon characters to resist when the opportunity arises. I got to cut off a yammering scientist mid-babble to tell him shut the hell up, throw a mid-interview punch at the bitchy Citadel news reporter who besmirched my good name in the first game, stealth-kill a mechanic repairing a mercenary gunship before it went into action against a friend and kick an uncooperative prisoner out of a skyscraper window. All Paragons get to do is heal wounded people moments before they'd otherwise draw their last breath or push an unsuspecting victim out of the way of a sniper's bullet at the last second. But those are OK too...I guess.

The Illusive Muppet

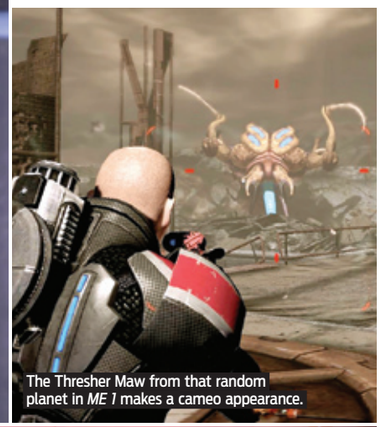
Considering that *ME2* is a cross-platform game, it's impressive how much better it looks than *ME1*. Texture and lighting quality are much improved—importing your *ME1* characters, for example, gives them much more refined features, and environmental detail gets a similar boost. It's still not quite state-of-the-art, but it's good enough that, combined with extremely cinematic camera work in cut-scenes as well as judiciously applied depth-of-field blurring, the game almost always looks terrific. Only character animations seem to lag behind the rest of the game's sterling visual effects—certain actions and expressions are just plain bad. The Illusive Man's arms wave around and clumsily gesticulate like a marionette, and watching a bartender pour a drink in the Afterlife Bar on Omega Station is cringeworthy. Most animations range from "passable" to "good," however, which is why those aforementioned bad moments stick out like sore thumbs.

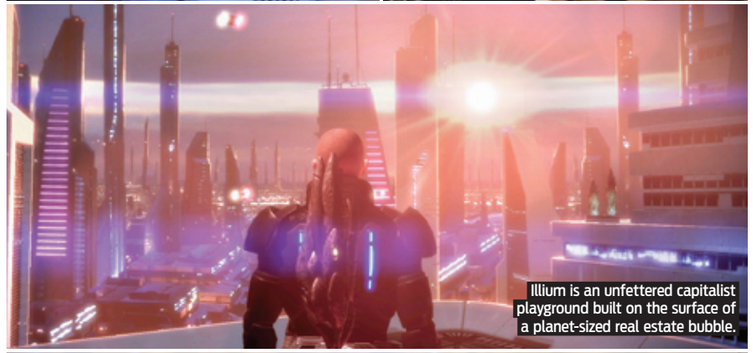
Left-click interrupts this news interview to bring this sleazy Citadel reporter an important message from Shepard's fist.


If Justicar Samara sees you breaking the law, she's honor-bound to kill you. Good to have *in* your party, but no fun *at* parties.

Play your cards right and Shepard can get a little extra companionship out of his companions.

ME's various alien species look even better than the humans up close.


The Thresher Maw from that random planet in *ME 1* makes a cameo appearance.


Illium is an unfettered capitalist playground built on the surface of a planet-sized real estate bubble.

Even the most powerful alien bug eye-beams can't penetrate whatever these crates are made of. Can't I just have a suit of armor made out of crates?

Oh, the places you'll go

Most of the game takes place inside starships, space stations or high-tech ground-based facilities that might as well be in space. There's some variety in those, since they range from the bright and shiny promenades of The Citadel to the dingy corridors of Omega Station, but there are also some very distinct and impressive outdoor locations. The capitalist world of Illium, for instance, is heavily reminiscent of *Star Wars*' Coruscant, and a stark contrast to the rubble-strewn landscapes of the Krogan homeworld of Tuchanka.

Level design in combat areas is generally attractive but blocky and workmanlike, to the point where some areas have inexplicable waist-high barriers that pop out of the ground to provide cover when combat begins. It's so contrived (why would anyone build these things?) that it feels like an in-joke for cover-based shooter players. If so, it's a good one—I laughed. But there are a few levels that add a clever twist or two to keep things interesting, like a planet orbiting a star so bright that standing in direct sunlight fries your shields.

Level design is so contrived that it feels like an in-joke for cover-based shooter players. If so, it's a good one—I laughed.

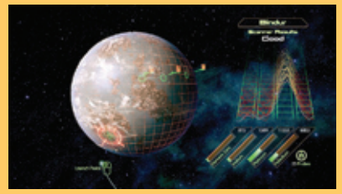
MINIGAMES, MINI FUN

BioWare could learn a few things from PopCap on making minigames with longevity

ME2 has three different minigames you have to beat to access locked-out areas or hunt for resources, but they have a fatal flaw: none of them introduce anything new to shake things up as the game goes along, making them repetitive and dreary far too quickly.

Bypass
Mousing over nodes reveals a symbol; connecting all sets of a matching symbols wins.
Number of times it's fun: Four

Hack
Sections of illegible color-coded computer code slowly scroll up the screen. Spot the one that matches the key at the top of the screen three times before time runs out. **Number of times it's fun: Seven**

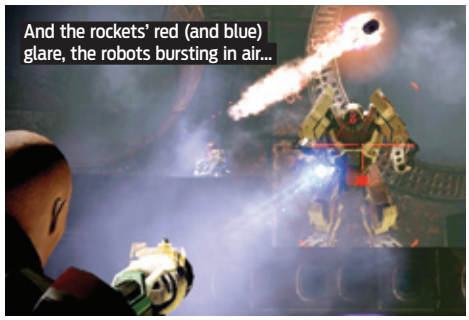


Space Prospecting
If you want to research the technology you pick up in missions, you'll have to go hunting for precious materials. Mousing over the globes of one of the dozens of uninhabited planets on the map displays a graph of any resources detected, which can then be collected by a probe. It's immediately tedious.
Number of times it's fun: Zero
But I guess mining's not really *supposed* to be fun.

I think this qualifies as Krogan foreplay.

The Illusive Man hangs out in his giant TV room watching the Swirly Red Stuff Channel.

Fire powers melt armor into mush. To cut through shields, activate shock ammo.



And the rockets' red (and blue) glare, the robots bursting in air...

If there had been any doubt at the eleventh hour, *Mass Effect 2* solidified its standing with the amazing climax.

Of course, I'd have to turn in my sci-fi nerd card if I didn't have some nitpicks with the story, so I'll point out that it struck me as odd that there's virtually no mention of Specters in this game. No active Specters show up, and Shepard may or may not be a valid member of the inter-stellar super-agent club himself. It's also strange that the Alliance government that dominated the galaxy in the first game plays such a small role in the second, and makes no effort to stop Cerberus or capture the Illusive Man. But I'd still rank *Mass Effect 2* as better written, better acted and better looking than all but the very best of the past decade of science fiction television and film.

Grand finale

If there had been any doubt at the eleventh hour, *Mass Effect 2* solidified its standing in the amazing climactic mission, which is easily one of the best game endings I've played in recent years. Without giving anything away, you must make difficult command decisions that put the lives of your crew on the line, knowing that the game is totally willing to kill them off at any time (and it delights in faking you out) if you make a wrong move or fail to come to class prepared. It does resort to some unimaginative boss fight gimmicks, but they're so well presented in context of the tense, action-packed finale that even those work brilliantly. *Mass Effect 2* is a thrilling, thoughtful adventure that leaves us exactly where BioWare wants us: primed and ready to import our character into *Mass Effect 3*.

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** The sequel to BioWare's original space opera RPG with third-person shooter combat **RELEASE** January 26, 2010 **EXPECT TO PAY** $50 **PLAY IT ON** Core 2 Duo 2.4GHz, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850 **MULTIPLAYER** None **PUBLISHER** EA **DEVELOPER** BioWare **LINK** masseffect.bioware.com **INFLUENCED BY** *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, et al. **ALTERNATIVELY** *Dragon Age: Origins* (92%) **COPY PROTECTION** Key code/Disc check **ESRB** M

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

Faster-paced action, difficult ethical decisions and an awesome ending make the second part of the best science fiction story you'll find in gaming even more immersive. For best results, play *Mass Effect* first.

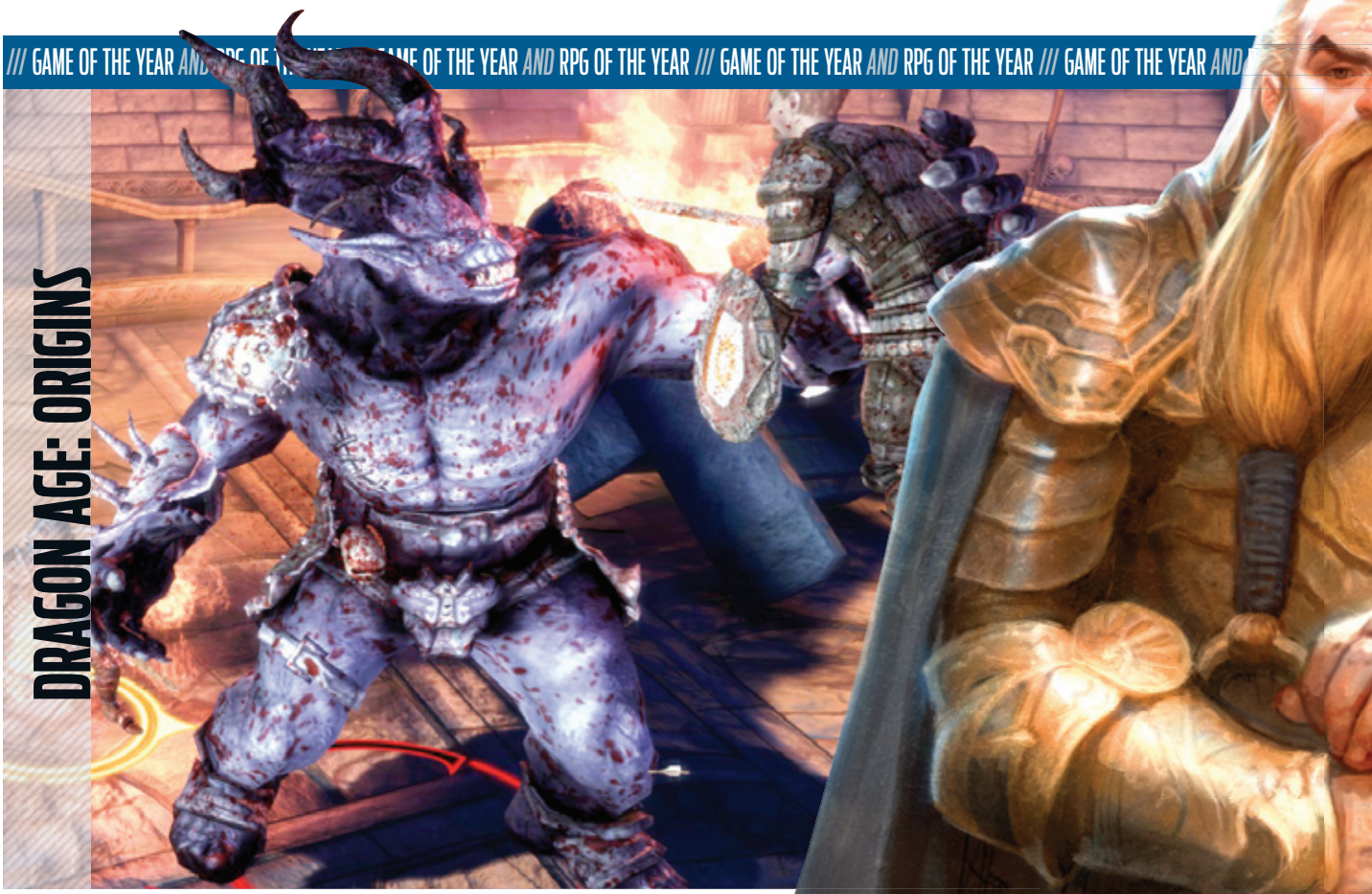
0% BETTER >> 100% **90%**

++ EDITORS' CHOICE ++

GAMES of the

A celebratory reel of 2009's finest gaming **by The PC Gamer Staff**

/// GAME OF THE YEAR AND [illegible] OF THE YEAR AND RPG OF THE YEAR /// GAME OF THE YEAR AND RPG OF THE YEAR /// GAME OF THE YEAR AND



Being a PC gamer in 2009 was like having our favorite football, baseball, water polo and women's croquet team win their respective championships in the same year. In every genre, standout titles emerged to restate the value of our platform—spiritual successors that were worthy of the term, the finest comic book game *ever*, sequels that bested their predecessors, humble adventures with hand-drawn robots that charmed our hearts.

As we flip back through 12 calendar pages of gaming, let the next 11 of ours celebrate the mouse clicks and keyboard taps we invested guzzling grog, tossing batarangs, crashing helicopters, capturing flags, firing guns made out of fish and being the beard-faced heroes of fantasy realms.

The Important People Who Awarded These Awards ...and all hate each other a little more from arguing about them Logan Decker (Editor-in-Chief), Dan Stapleton (Reviews Editor), Evan Lahti (Associate Editor), Josh Augustine (Contributing Editor), Erik Belsaas & Prentice Gede (Voiceless Interns)

YEAR

■ **You've got red on you.** Carrying the entrails of your enemies out of battle and into dramatic cut-scenes adds a tame bit of comedy in *Dragon Age*.

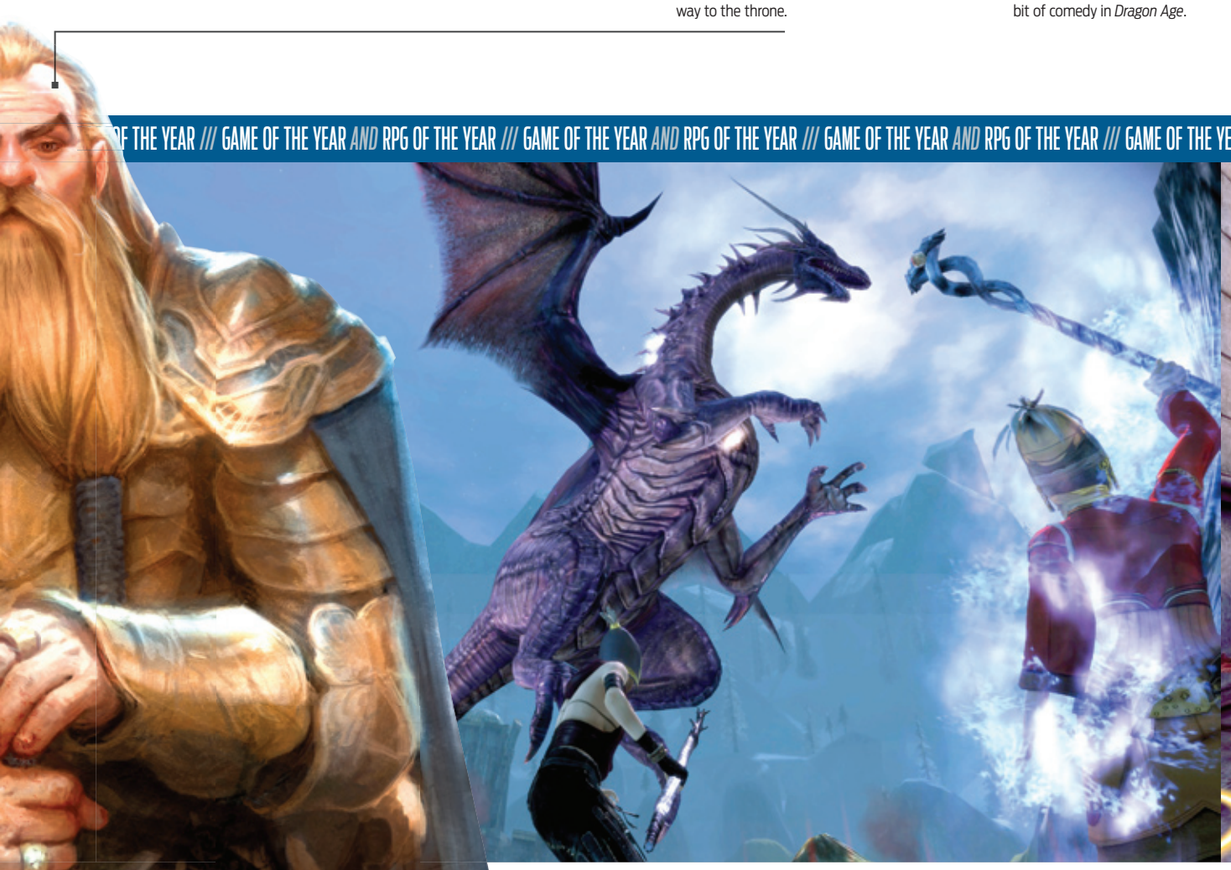
■ **Dwarven Noble** Our favorite origin story of *DA*'s six starting points inverts our usual expectation of dwarfs: in *Dragon Age*, they're not a race of honor-bound, rock-loving scots—they're scheming politicians that aren't afraid to backstab their way to the throne.

■ **230 Hours** Amount of time our RPG fanatic, Desslock, has invested so far in *Dragon Age*.

■ **Scavenge Mode** contributed a lot *L4D2*'s 92% score. Gathering up gasoline cans (or knocking them out of survivors' hands, if you're on the infected team) sparks tense teamwork and on-the-fly tactics.

■ **Cricket bat**
O, Englishman's bludgeon! Louisville Slugger of Princess Diana, Oaken masher of (un)men. With regards to *Shaun of the Dead*, *Cluh-thunk!*

OF THE YEAR /// GAME OF THE YEAR *AND* RPG OF THE YEAR /// GAME OF THE YEAR *AND* RPG OF THE YEAR /// GAME OF THE YEAR *AND* RPG OF THE YEAR /// GAME OF THE YEAR *AND* RPG OF THE YEAR /// GAME OF THE YEAR *AND* RPG OF THE YEAR /// SHOOTER OF THE YEAR /// SHOOTER OF THE YEAR /// SHOOTER OF THE YEAR



VITALS
PUBLISHER EA
DEVELOPER BioWare
RELEASE DATE November 5
RUNNERS-UP *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, *Left 4 Dead 2*
SCORE 92% Holiday '09

For serious role-playing PC gamers, a magnificent, mature role-playing adventure in the proud tradition of *Baldur's Gate* only comes along every blue moon.

With its own tome filled with unique lore of tragedy, conflict and heroism, BioWare's dark fantasy tale is so much more than a *Lord of the Rings* knockoff. Its realistic, bloody style is a welcome contrast to the dominant trend of colorful, cartoonish fantasy worlds established by the *World of Warcraft* behemoth.

It may have been released across all major platforms, but *Dragon Age* is a PC game at heart, and the PC version is the definitive one. *Dragon Age* challenges us with long tactical battles against deadly Darkspawn hordes—it makes orchestrating battle thrilling. Assembling the perfect team, hand-picking their abilities, calibrating their AI behaviors with *DA*'s excellent party command tools—every battle became a brutal round of fantasy chess: the perfect middle-ground between patient turn-based tactics and the exciting pace of real-time action.

Dragon Age also immerses us and makes us feel important in its world. Difficult choices can have disastrous consequences, and the colorful crew of companions that accompany you aren't afraid to offer guidance and judge our deeds. Rarely in the history of non-playable characters has a supporting cast felt so alive, or so opinionated. Each of them possesses his or her own set of personal goals, morals and combat abilities that define how you interact with the game from the moment you set out on your journey to the thrilling conclusion.

Dragon Age reveres and reproduces the story depth and longevity of RPG classics like *Baldur's Gate* while modernizing its combat and dialog system with uncompromising complexity. And as we celebrate this accomplishment, we hope *Origins* is only a foundation for further adventures to come.

VITALS
PUBLISHER Valve / EA
DEVELOPER Valve
RELEASE DATE November 17
RUNNERS-UP *Borderlands*, *Wolfenstein*
SCORE 92% January '10

We don't care about zombies. They're passé, they're ubiquitous: every other movie is about them, they're in *Call of Duty* game modes, stamped on Hot Topic T-shirts and fridge magnets and limping their way into our damn puzzle games (see p. 66). But *Left 4 Dead* has never been *about* zombies. It's never been a scary or horror-driven experience. Zombies are just the lurching, rotted obstacle course you have to run through to get from point A to point B.

Left 4 Dead is about *survival*, and the stories four players construct by trying to keep each other alive. *L4D2* is so light on narrative and exposition because it wants

■ **Greatest Hits**
Favorite new infected: Spitter. *Favorite campaign: Hard Rain.* Survivors hit with Boomer vomit: 183. *Most damage inflicted as an Infected character: 461 (Evan, as a Smoker).* Least-favorite melee weapon: Electric guitar. *Total gas cans poured in Scavenge mode: 995.* Infected killed: 15,331. *Melee kills: 4,410.* Pipe Bombs thrown: 194.

■ **Our favorite "Ellis-ism"**
"My buddy Keith lived in a graveyard once for a whole year. *It wuddn't a dare or nuthin', he just got kicked out of his house. He said he never saw a single ghost 'cept this one time when a ghost stabbed him from behind and took all his money..."*

/// SHOOTER OF THE YEAR /// SHOOTER OF THE YEAR /// SHOOTER OF THE YEAR /// SHOOTER OF THE YEAR /// SHOOTER OF THE YEAR /// SHOOTER OF THE YEAR /// SHOOTER OF THE YEAR /// SHOOTER OF THE YEAR /// SHOOTER OF THE YEAR /// SHOOTER OF THE YEAR /// ADVENTURE GAME OF THE YEAR /// ADVENTURE GAME OF THE YEAR /// ADVENT IE YEAR /// ADVENTURE GAM

TALES OF MONKEY ISLAND

players to value these vignettes—the stories and watercooler moments that are formed by your team's deaths, bullets, bandages and foolish wandering-off in multiplayer sessions.

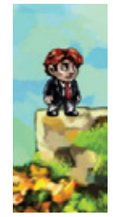
And that's maybe the most underrated aspect of Valve's work—it managed to produce a game where players' mistakes and missteps (pointing your flashlight at a Witch, leaving your teammates behind to search for extra health kits) aren't game-ending errors, but opportunities for teamwork and heroism and a source of drama as you try to save one another from a dynamic, crazy casserole of zombie threats.

L4D2 simply piles more (and better) elements into that design: glee- and gore-inducing melee weapons, nastier special infected characters and a wider variety of Southern set pieces. Shotgunning through undead that explode with mortal confetti like zombie piñatas (thanks to *L4D2*'s impressive model-deformation animations) refreshed the thrill of every kill.

We're thrilled to celebrate the unique situations *L4D2* pushes players into: moments that demand improvisation (the *Dead Center* fill-up-the-car finale), running and gunning (The Parish bridge finale) and unfettered teamwork (*Hard Rain*'s maze of Witches and torrential rain).

/// BEST ENDING ///

BRAID
It's rare that a game really makes you think. Even more rare? A game that changes the way you think. Braid's final level is a tour de force of mind-destroying deliciousness that will transmute the way you think about gaming forever. If you haven't, play it.



■ Fans of LucasArts' adventure games got a double dose of Guybrush in 2009. *The Secret of Monkey Island: Special Edition* re-released Threepwood's original adventures with completely re-imagined art that you could swap in at any time.

VITALS
PUBLISHER
Telltale Games
DEVELOPER
Telltale Games
RELEASE DATE
Episodic, launched on July 7
RUNNERS-UP
Machinarium, Secret of Monkey Island Spec. Ed.
SCORE
87%
(Launch of the *Screaming Narwhal)*

Few characters can single-handedly carry the banner of their genre. But Guybrush Threepwood has always been one such protagonist—happy to (in an Iwo Jima–like pose) force the flag of adventure gaming upright again, to steady it and remind us how much pointing, clicking and comedy-thick storytelling can charm the gaming world.

With *Tales,* Telltale Games continues to bring value to its model of episodic game releases. For a season of '09, we relived the wonder of Guybrush's quirky, ridiculous pirate adventures, washing away nearly a decade of bottled-up patience waiting for a proper continuation of LucasArts' series.

But, like the originals, *Tales* remained a cleverly well-written romp that made us laugh. And laugh. And when we weren't laughing, we were solving those damn item-combining puzzles, fighting off that undead meanie LeChuck and yes, even crying (Episode Four, the *Trial and Execution of Guybrush Threepwood*).

And with Telltale reporting that it was its most financially rewarding franchise, it seems there might be much, much more in store for everyone's favorite swashbuckling scoundrels. So to the dreamy-eyed gamer out there yearning for more—just be careful what you wish for.

■ In October, *The Last Stand* completely refreshed our interest in *Dawn of War II*. A cooperative, three-player survival mode was the perfect complement to competitive multiplayer and the campaign. We were completely invested in earning loot and levels for our Eldar, Space Marine and Ork heroes for a few weeks.

■ We love the way Bolters animate in *Dawn of War II*. Their inaccuracy makes them beautifully messy weapons: Brakka-brakking streams of lead adds, even slightly, to the notion that battle in the 40k universe is a brutal, imprecise and vicious thing.

/// DOTA-STYLE GAME OF THE YEAR ///

LEAGUE OF LEGENDS
An accessible, cartoony visual style and a vast set of upgrades elevates to earn elevates LoL above the other *Defense of the Ancients*-style games that released in '09. New players come for the great tutorials and free-to-play business model and stay for the zany characters and fast-paced action.

■ Like this planet? This shimmering space marble is one of countless found in *EVE*'s 5,200 solar systems. That's a lot of chunks of rock to conquer!

■ Between *EVE*'s four races' fleets, there are over 246 ships in the game, with nigh-infinite customization combinations.

/// WILD CARD AWARD ///

TORCHLIGHT
Nobody saw this plucky action-RPG coming, but when we realized that dozens of hours had disappeared into the bottomless, randomly generated creature-infested mines beneath the quaint fairy-tale town of *Torchlight*, we knew that we'd stumbled upon one of the games for which 2009 would be fondly remembered.

THE YEAR /// STRATEGY GAME OF THE YEAR /// STRATEGY GAME OF THE YEAR /// STRATEGY GAME OF THE YEAR /// STRATEGY GAME OF THE YEAR /// STRATEGY GAME OF THE YEAR /// STRATEGY GAME OF THE YEAR /// MMO OF THE YEAR /// MMO OF THE YEAR /// MMO OF THE YEAR /// MMO OF THE YEAR /// MMO OF THE YEAR /// ACTION GAME OF THE YEAR /// ACTION

WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR II

VITALS
PUBLISHER THQ
DEVELOPER Relic Entertainment
RELEASE DATE February 19
RUNNERS-UP *Empire: Total War, Men of War*
SCORE 86% March '09

Action figures. The joy of holding them in your fists—of putting little plastic machine guns and lasers in their molded hands, moving them over sand and grass in your backyard, of mashing them against a rubber dinosaur (that you pretend to be a giant alien lizard) you found in your older brother's closet.

Buying *Dawn of War II* is like unwrapping six pristine, detailed, walking, grunting, shooting Space Marine action figures. And the campaign is the joy of playing with them in a terrifying universe filled with evil aliens—pushing them behind alien shrubs and bunkers, gunning down rock-skinned Tyranids, looting up better bolters and flamethrowers to attach to your heroes.

Relic took a risk drawing on game mechanics from other genres (leveling, a cover system and loot), but it resulted in one of the most satisfying RTS campaigns ever. It also produced one of the most technically outstanding strategy games of the decade: *DoW2*'s controls, cover system, gorgeous battle animations (that are almost too detailed to belong in a strategy game) and how well it implemented a story worthy of *Warhammer 40,000*'s ultra-dark sci-fi canon are all significant feats.

EVE ONLINE

VITALS
PUBLISHER CCP
DEVELOPER CCP
RELEASE DATE May 6, 2003
RUNNERS-UP *World of Warcraft, Champions Online*
SCORE 55%*, Sept '03
**It got better.*

In MMO years, *EVE Online* is elderly. But even six and a half years after release, CCP's massive space game is as popular as it's ever been. In 2009, *EVE* broke its all-time concurrent users record when 54,181 users logged in simultaneously—an impressive number because of *EVE Online*'s single-shard server design, meaning that those users were logged into the same instance of the game.

We love that there are no artificial barriers keeping players from interacting with every single one of their friends, enemies, and random strangers that also play the game. CCP's vigorous release of content for the game this year was nothing short of inspirational. Two major expansion packs (*Dominion* and *Apocrypha*) and a re-release of boxed copies into brick-and-mortar stores. 2009 saw the introduction of space-travelling wormholes, improved tutorials and interface elements like the in-game browser, expanded mission arcs, and a complete overhaul of PvP factional warfare, among everything else. Wow.

And more than ever, the players of *EVE Online* earned this award with their usual shenanigans of hacking and twisting game elements to serve entirely unforeseen purposes, including the underground trade of human NPCs, embezzlement scandals, in-game mega-banks mirroring the financial collapse of the real world economy, and the nebulous "wormhole piracy."

BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM

This was the year that the Dark Knight stormed onto our PCs with a vengeance. We knew going in that Batman: Arkham Asylum would have a great dark, gritty look and feel, and that it would reunite Mark Hamill and Kevin Conroy to reprise their voice roles as The Joker and Batman, but never in our wildest dreams did we imagine that the gameplay could be this awesome.

Arkham Asylum defied the standards set by super-hero games past. It's an excellent Batman game that treats the characters and setting with fanboyish reverence, littering the dark, detailed halls of Arkham with puzzles, clues and references to other Batman villains stories. It's also a ▸

■ Best villain: Mark Hamill's performance as The Joker is spine-chilling. This, not Luke Skywalker, is the role he was born to play.

■ Addiction factor: Competing for the highest scores in the brawling challenge levels makes you feel like a badass even when you don't place first.

/// BEST MODE ///

SPEC OPS—CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE 2

Spec Ops' 23 super-tough two-player cooperative missions are a shortcut to the best action in *MW2* sans the silly plot twists and messy matchmaking. Our favorite stage: Overwatch. One player needs to get to the end of a map on foot while his partner watches from the gunner seat of an AC-130 gunship overhead.

■ Taxiing teammates into warzones (or yelling "Eject! Eject!" dramatically when your tail rotor gets whacked by an anti-air missile) is one of *ArmA 2*'s singular thrills.

■ *ArmA 2* is the modern pinnacle of emergent gaming. Unscripted AI, hundreds of weapons and equipment and a small country's-worth of wide-open space fashions warplay that develops organically.

/// WOMAN OF THE YEAR ///

NANCY DREW (SERIES)

The videogame industry wrings its hands each year wondering how to get more women interested in development. But Her Interactive already cracked the case: it's 21 quality *Nancy Drew* adventure games have consistently topped the sales charts for years, and we expect a new generation of videogame enthusiasts to emerge as a result.

ACTION GAME OF THE YEAR /// ACTION GAME OF THE YEAR /// ACTION GAME OF THE YEAR /// ACTION GAME OF THE YEAR /// ACTION GAME OF THE YEAR /// ACTION GAME OF THE YEAR /// "MOST PC" GAME /// "MOST PC" GAME /// "MOST PC" GAME /// "MOST PC" GAME /// "MOST PC" GAME /// "MOST PC" GAME /// "MOST PC" GAME /// "MOST PC" GAME /// "MOST PC" GAME /

VITALS

PUBLISHER Eidos
DEVELOPER Rocksteady
RELEASE DATE September 17
RUNNERS-UP *Resident Evil 5, Mirror's Edge*
SCORE 93% December '09

third-person fighter that plays just as well—or better—on the mouse and keyboard than it does on a gamepad. It lets us play with all of Batman's wonderful toys, from sonic batarangs to the batgrapple, and experience the stealthy ninja-like style of crimefighting by picking off armed henchmen one at a time. Then it switches to a huge brawl with a dozen of The Joker's thugs using the best, most satisfying and free-flowing combat system we've ever seen, turning Batman into a smoothly animated, unstoppable whirlwind of fists and feet that won't stop until every enemy in the room is beaten into unconsciousness. And, as the best use of Nvidia's PhysX technology to date, the PC version looks considerably better than its console counterpart. It does what all games aspire to, but few truly accomplish: makes you feel like a total badass.

VITALS

PUBLISHER IDEA Games
DEVELOPER Bohemia Interactive
RELEASE DATE July 7
RUNNERS-UP *Team Fortress 2, Demigod*
SCORE 83% August '09

PC gamers are obsessed with fidelity. We want our graphics cards to be tuned, well-oiled engines that render the undiluted *truth* of what games should look like; we want our headsets to pour authentic 5.1 audio into our ears; we want our mice to be extensions of our will that register every minor input.

ArmA 2 is an expression of the power and value of fidelity as a wargaming experience. In the right setting (for us: online co-op with 10-20 friends connected in voice chat), it becomes a pure platform for realism: every bullet trajectory, helicopter take-off and missile impact is accurately modeled. It's a game where "classes" emerge from nuanced equipment and skillsets: snipers, artillerymen, tacticians that can read maps, medics, tank gunners, scouts that laser-mark enemy tanks for aerial bombardment.

The best side effects of this design is a venue that swells with immersion: If an A-10 Warthog crashes two miles away, you'll hear the explosion 10 seconds later. In large-scale missions, you'll stumble across full-scale tank battles that have absolutely nothing to do with your mission objective.

ArmA 2 is also our "most PC" game of 2009 for its outstanding community support. In half a year, military sim enthusiasts have modded dozens of pieces of war equipment into the game along with ▸

■ Realistic as it is, our favorite moments of *ArmA 2* are the ones that break the game's semi-rigid rules.

■ *Zeno Clash* brought us more animal-people to punch in the face than we could ever hope for. Well, there wasn't a platypus-man...but everything else we could ever hope for.

■ A special shout-out goes to Deadra, Ghat's girlfriend/sister, for having the strangest outfit ever. A spinal sternum-guard, lantern belt and shoulder pads with some mammoth teeth make for an ensemble that only she could pull off. Probably because of that awesome afro/horns combo.

■ *Zeno Clash* didn't stop with crazy character designs. From the Bone sword to the fish pistol, the weapons are just as unique.

/// BEST ART DIRECTION ///

BORDERLANDS

Borderlands is more than just a pretty face—the eternal pursuit of a better gun had us fighting bandits in co-op for weeks—but how about that pretty face? Its distinct hand-drawn textures make every frame rendered looks like a panel ripped from a graphic novel. *Borderlands* will continue to turn heads for years to come.

/// "MOST PC" GAME /// "MOST PC" GAME /// "MOST PC" GAME /// "MOST PC" GAME /// "MOST PC" GAME /// "MOST PC" GAME /// INDIE GAME OF THE YEAR /// IN... OF THE YEAR /// INDIE GAME OF THE YEAR /// INDIE GAME OF THE YEAR /// INDIE GAME OF THE YEAR /// SIMULATION OF THE YEAR /// SIMULATION OF THE YEAR /// SIMULATION OF THE YEAR /// S...

ZENO CLASH

DCS: BLACK SHARK

entirely new islands, interface add-ons and utilities, scripting tools, hundreds of downloadable missions and even full conversions like the Advanced Combat Environment mod, which brings obnoxious levels of realism with features like mid-air refueling, weapon jams and an expanded medical system that adds unconsciousness, morphine and temporary hearing loss.

Even amid AI bugs and engine optimization issues that continue to be patched, *ArmA 2* is an unapologetic expression of what's possible on the PC: complexity, community, technical excellence and the wonder of simulation.

Have you ever had a dream that was so odd, that upon waking you just had to sit there and think? Playing *Zeno Clash* is like dwelling in a lucid dream. But that isn't as self-indulgent as it sounds: *Zeno* brought us more than well-presented nihilistic philosophy—packaged with some incredible art was the best brawling we've ever felt against our knuckles in first-person.

Zeno Clash wasn't unique for uniqueness' sake. The bizarre world drew you into a bizarre, incredibly deep story. You play as Ghat, a caveman-looking nomad, born from a hermaphroditic Mother-Father, who is dating his girlfriend, who may also be his sister and running away from the rest of his family... who are trying to punch Ghat out of existence. The game doesn't really teach you this explicitly, it's just assumed as part of the world. A crazy, mixed-up, self-contained dreamscape that hit our brains like a mental cleanse.

But we aren't just recognizing this game for its world. *Zeno Clash* utilized the physics inherent to Valve's Source engine to great effect: The first time we got to punch a parrot-man into his pack of avocado-faced friends, we were hooked. The simple-yet-deep melee combat mixed in with crazy Cro-Magnon armaments kept combat adrenaline-filled the whole way through.

ACE Team managed to take all these elements and (with some sort of magic, we're convinced) mold them into a compelling and memorable experience that tugs at the seams of what art within games can express—a fine boundary for any indie game to push.

VITALS

PUBLISHER
ACE Team

DEVELOPER
ACE Team

RELEASE DATE
April 21

RUNNERS-UP
Braid, Machinarium

SCORE
84%
July '09

Like the best air combat sims, *Black Shark* is a perfect model of its titular aircraft—so much so that the developer actually double-dips between selling *Black Shark* as a commercial product and military training tool. So here's to coaxial rotor systems. Here's to 100,000-polygon 3D models of aircraft. Here's to the sound of a 400-page PDF manual hitting (and denting) our desk. And here's to a sim that genuinely makes us want to get to, enter, and then eject out of "da chopper" after we inevitably steer it into a mountain.

VITALS

PUBLISHER
Take-two Interactive

DEVELOPER
Eagle Dynamics

RELEASE DATE
April 13

RUNNERS-UP
iRacing.com

SCORE
82%
April '09

■ ZTV: The *Plants vs. Zombies* video (by *PvZ* composer Laura Shigihara) can't be explained to you. You have to see it for yourself. http://www.popcap.com/extras/pvz/

■ Like most PopCap games, you can play an ad-supported version of *Plants vs. Zombies* for free at www.plantsversuszombies.com.

/// BEST SOUNDTRACK ///

MACHINARIUM

In a game where no one speaks a word, the music has to do a lot of talking. And *Machinarium*'s soundtrack, composed by Tomas Dvorak, is one of the most eloquent we've ever heard. By turns spooky, dissonant, melancholy, sweet and evocative, it slithers into your imagination and adds unexpected depth to the game's gorgeous imagery.

SIMULATION OF THE YEAR /// PUZZLE GAME OF THE YEAR /// PUZZLE GAME OF THE YEAR /// PUZZLE GAME OF THE YEAR /// PUZZLE GAME OF THE YEAR /// PUZZLE GAME OF THE YEAR /// PUZZLE GAM

PLANTS VS. ZOMBIES

VITALS

PUBLISHER
PopCap

DEVELOPER
PopCap

RELEASE DATE
May 5

RUNNERS-UP
Machinarium
Zuma

SCORE
90%
June '09

You'd never, ever understand how great a game *Plants vs. Zombies* is just by watching somebody play it. You might notice that it has some real-time strategy elements. You'll probably catch that it took a thing or two from role-playing games as well. You won't miss the nod toward card-playing games, nor the tower defense, er, "flower defense" aspect. But what you can't tell just by looking at it is how superbly balanced *PvZ* is, from the beginning through miles of levels, modes and mini-games all the way to the end. It's so well-balanced that within an hour, even neophyte gamers will find themselves instinctively countering zombie jockeys riding undead dolphins with a phalanx of Tall-Nuts (which, with detail characteristic of PopCap, shed a single, poignant tear when hit).

Wave after zombie wave keeps you on your toes (hoes?), and new zombies force you to constantly adjust your strategies and smogasbordnance. But though *Plants vs. Zombies* requires your full attention and punishes mistakes harshly, its animations stay fresh and hilarious and, like *Peggle* before it, overflows with PopCap's patented "just one more level" addictivity. 2009 has had plenty for puzzle game fans to write home about, but nothing came close to burying *Plants vs. Zombies*. ■

BioShock 2's Brutes are like *Left 4 Dead*'s Tanks: big, ugly and extremely hard to kill.

HOW WE RATE THE GAMES

0–30% INTOLERABLE
A crime against gaming. Whether it's bugs or bad design, this should be shot on sight.

31–45% WEAK
Serious flaws ruin any chance this game has of offering sustained fun.

46–60% MEDIOCRE
A very ordinary game, quickly forgotten. Think twice even if you find it cheap.

61–75% FAIR
A decent effort that, but for a little more polish, coulda been a contender.

76–89% GOOD
Enjoyable, well-made and entertaining—just falling short of true greatness.

90%+ EDITORS' CHOICE
Oozing class, this is the work of experts at the top of their game. Bravo, sirs!

BIOSHOCK 2

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE ★★★★★

As the atmospheric shooter resurfaces, refined action equalizes a second-string villain ***by Graham Smith***

Everyone has forgotten how good the original *BioShock* was. Let me remind you.

It started with a plane crashing into the Atlantic. It was set in a 1950s art-deco utopia at the bottom of the sea, where crazed freaks threw knives and scuttled across ceilings. You fired fireballs, iceballs and bee swarms. You took pictures of corpses for an art exhibit. "A man chooses, a slave obeys." That confrontation. That twist. It was smart. It was about objectivist philosophy. It was about something! It had good dialogue. It had exciting combat. It was touching. It was frightening. It was like no other game, except the very best of games. It was like *System Shock*. We loved it.

And then we hated it, for a bit. It wasn't as good as *System Shock 2*, didn't you realize? It was dumbed down. For consoles, probably. The shooting wasn't even that good. You could kill those Big Daddies just by whacking them with the wrench, couldn't you? That escort mission. That boss fight. None of this, please.

In the end, though, we couldn't stay mad.

BioShock 2 has the unenviable task of following one of the most-praised and most-criticized games ever. You can't help but view it through the prism of what came before. So let's get this out the way, to restore my sanity: compared to the first game, the high points are lower, but the low points are higher. On its own, it is a very good game.

Let me tell you how good.

BioShock's most iconic image is its sad and lumbering Big Daddies. Gentle giants, they stomped around, protected the Little Sisters, and let out long groans when you killed them to harvest their precious resources. They were beautiful monsters.

Now you are, too. In *BioShock 2* you're an Alpha, a Big Daddy prototype created when Rapture's scientists were still trying to perfect their bulky bodyguards' protective instincts. Their solution was to chemically bond you with a single Little Sister—you were given a father's love for her, to make sure that you'd never stray.

Cue father-daughter outings to the park to suck gunk from corpses, until a woman called Dr. Sofia Lamb hits you with a plasmid that removes your free will and makes you shoot yourself in the head. Ten years later you inexplicably reawaken, back in Rapture, free will returned, with only one thing on your mind: Find your Little Sister. Find Daddy's little girl.

You're chemically bonded with a Little Sister—you're given a father's love for her.

Sister act

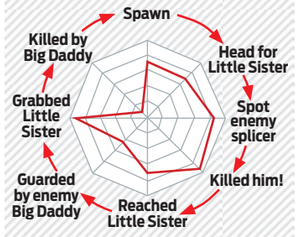
In *BioShock 2*, you are one half of the relationship that made the first game so interesting. You are plugged directly into the ecology of the city, and where the first game only offered you the binary moral choice of whether to Harvest for Adam or Rescue for slightly-less Adam, you now have the choice to adopt. Choose to adopt one and you'll lift her up on your shoulders where she'll yell at enemies as they attack, which is cool in itself. But pressing the button to activate "Daddy Sense" will produce a snaking white light that guides you to nearby corpses containing Adam. Decide to gather from that corpse and she'll climb down and start syringing. But while she's working, the process will draw the attention of a dozen angry, jonesing Splicers.

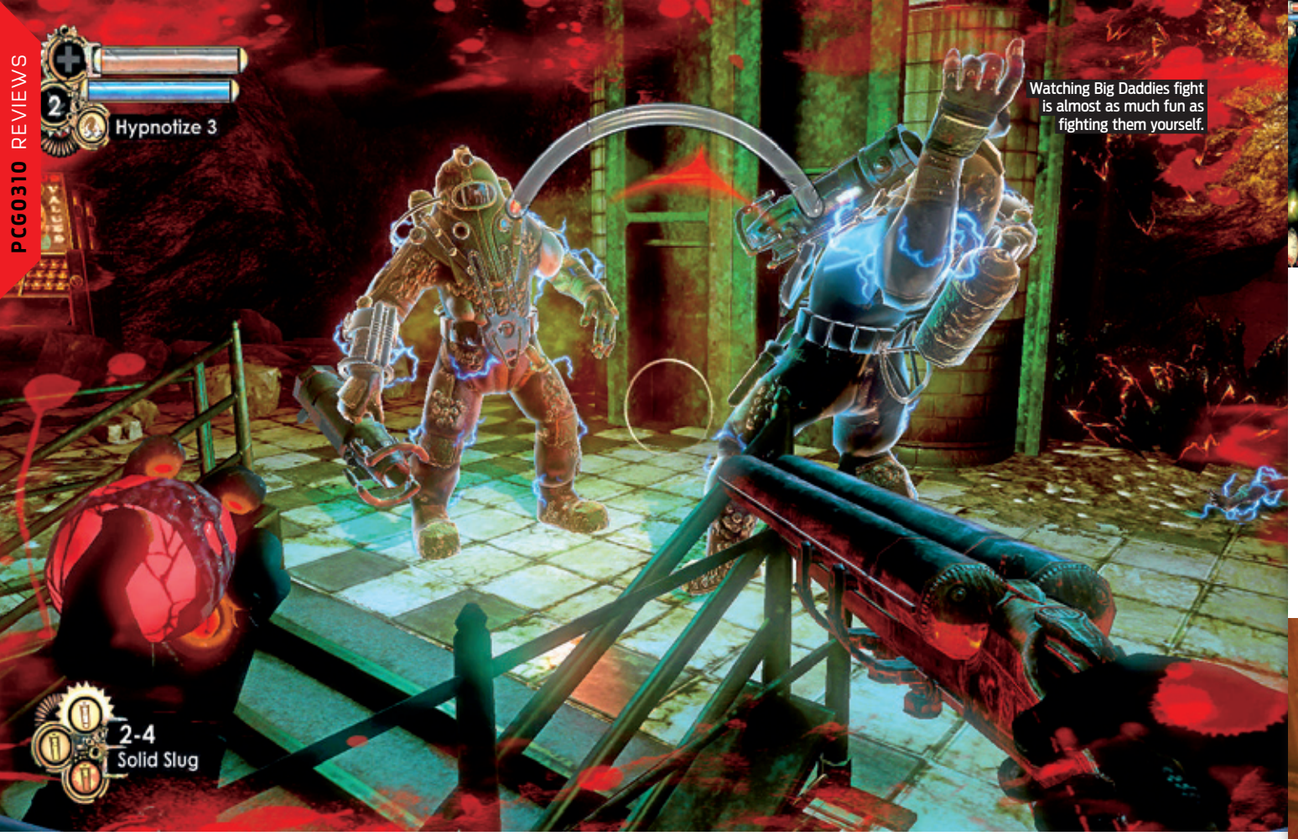
The first *BioShock* excelled at fantastic battle scenarios against Big Daddies. Each was a significant undertaking: they'd light up red with fury when you attacked, and come crashing down on top of you. The same is true in the gather fights against onslaughts of Splicers. When you decide you want the more Adam to buy the next plasmid (magic powers, jargon-haters) you're able to plant mines, traps and hunker down for preparation before triggering the attack. They're tremendous fun—exciting and stressful in just the right ways.

Capture the Sister

The ups and downs of *BioShock 2* multiplayer

BioShock 2's best new mutiplayer mode is Capture the Sister, in which the defenders have a randomly chosen Big Daddy player and the attackers have to get the Sister to a vent. How an attacker's life breaks down:





Other Big Daddies that still roam Rapture now regain a portion of their health when you die (and Vita-chambers can be turned off from the options menu), so battling them can no longer be circumvented by whittling them down with constant suicide attacks. If you want their Little Sisters, you must plan your attack as the non-cynical did in the first game: hack the security cameras, befriend a security droid, hypnotize some enemies to your side and plant some mines. Creativity prevails.

You're able to weave the combat situations around you, friendly bots circling above, a Big Daddy fighting at your side and all nearby Splicers covered in bees.

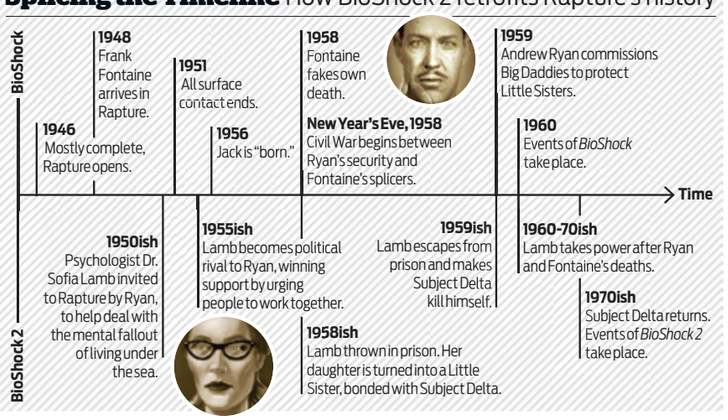
There's a third type of systemic boss fight: the Big Sisters. Little Sisters that are now too grown-up to continue as cutesy post-mortem juicers have modeled themselves after the only adult role-model they've ever had. They've got the diving helmet, a tank on their back and a spiked protuberance on their arm, but they're a lot more nimble. They dash in and out of sight, leap from floor to ledges and back, and pounce with terrifying speed.

These fights are triggered by deciding the fates of Little Sisters. Whether you harvest or rescue, there's a chance a Big Sister won't like what you did. You have time to prepare, but barely. When you kill them, it doesn't leave you feeling as sad or guilty as when you defeat a Big Daddy—it's just a relief.

Covered in bees

A perk of being a Big Daddy is that you have an enormous drill on one arm. A lot of people used the first game's wrench a lot, combining it with a stun plasmid and just whacking away. *BioShock 2* figures, "Well, if people are going to melee a lot, then it may as well be with a giant drill that gores people through the chest." Good figuring, *BioShock 2*.

Splicing the Timeline How BioShock 2 retrofits Rapture's history



It's the first of a whole bunch of changes that make this a better shooter. The revolver is gone, but now you have the rivet gun, the spear gun, missile/mine launcher, a shotgun and a few others. There's plenty of choice, each weapon having multiple ammo types, although it can be incredibly difficult to juggle plasmids and weapons when you're being repeatedly smashed in the face from all sides.

And that's often, because *BioShock 2*'s fights are chaotic. Splicers use cover, dive to avoid your shots, climb on scenery and throw grenades to chase you out of hiding. What makes it fun is that you're gradually given the power to control that chaos. My favorite thing to do is use Hypnotize and the bot-summoning Security Beacon plasmid to turn the world against itself. By the game's end, you're able to weave the combat situations around you, friendly bots circling above, a Big Daddy fighting at your side and all nearby Splicers covered in bees.

To help control your environment, you're now armed with a remote weapon capable of firing hack darts. The PipeMania minigame is gone; instead you must stop a swinging needle within the green zone on a gauge, computer-golf style. What makes it challenging is that this no longer happens in a paused world—you must stop that needle with one finger while the rest fight baddies.

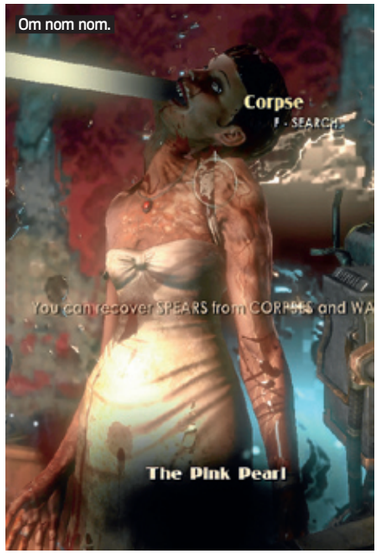
Plus, it hasn't stopped being funny to be a jerk in this world. Freeze people, then attach rocket spears, and you send them spinning around the room. At one point I had a Big Daddy and a damaged, flaming security bot at my side. Every so often the bot would edge too close to the Big Daddy and he'd burst into flame. "GRAAARARGH." And then he'd settle down, surrounded by friends. "GRAAARARGH."

Rapturous

The impression you should have by now is that *BioShock 2* is similar to its predecessor, mechanically tweaked in slight but improved ways. But there are a number of small, significant things on which *BioShock 2* fails to follow or improve on.

Andrew Ryan was *BioShock*'s central figure—at times, its villain—but what he was trying to accomplish was brilliant enough that you wanted him to succeed. That his vision and ideals were falling apart sunk the game in tragedy and helped make your final confrontation so shocking.

By comparison, Sofia Lamb's goals feel small. She believes that any sense of self must be evolved beyond, and that people should work only to serve the common good. But her plans never seem as dangerously brilliant as her one-time political rival. Where Ryan built Rapture, Lamb just lives in it.



Similarly, exploring Rapture for the second time takes you through all-new districts, each enormous and packed with detail and optional routes, but they're not as immediately compelling as before. It feels as if *BioShock* took us through all the most interesting locales, leaving *BioShock 2* to tread a less exciting path.

Parenthood

There are still great ideas—such as the amusement park built to teach Rapture's ideals to its children via animatronic dioramas. In other words, the game explains its own history to the player via a propaganda-spewing robot duplicate of Andrew Ryan.

Frustratingly, the best parts are spoilers, but I'll say that *BioShock 2* is about parenthood. It's an interesting thing for a game to tackle, and it does so in interesting ways. To talk about it any further would ruin it.

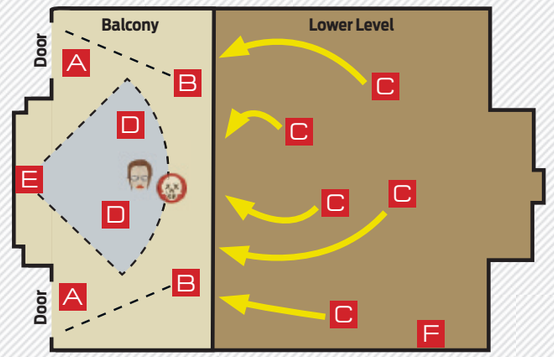
So let's talk about multiplayer, instead. When first announced, the idea of being teabagged in the cerebral world of Rapture felt sacrilegious, as if its creators didn't get what we liked about it to begin with. In practice, that's crap. We liked the explosions just fine, and the multiplayer is fun.

You begin by choosing your character and exploring a Rapture apartment. Newspapers provide your latest stats, your wardrobe customizes your character and a bathysphere awaits for when you went to start a match.

Most of the modes are familiar, just given world-appropriate names. The most obvious are Survival of the Fittest (deathmatch), Civil War (team deathmatch) and Turf War (Capture and Hold). These are given a twist via a randomly spawning Big Daddy suit, which one player can find and put on. It's akin to the Quad Damage in *Quake*, but trading off your increase in power and health by making you slow. Getting the chance to use it against your weaker friends is a glorious thrill, because again, it gives you an unfair advantage that you can use to be a jerk. Only now, to real people.

Prepare to Fight

Gathering Adam attracts an angry crowd. Here's how to control it.



- **A Trap Rivets** Plant Trap Rivets in every entrance.
- **B Mini Turret** Position turrets to cover wide angles.
- **C Splicers** Beware: Splicers can jump between levels.
- **D Proximity Mines** Plant proximity mines close to the Little Sister.
- **E Cameras** Hack any cameras to bring security to your aid.
- **F Vita Chambers** Respawn when you inevitably die.

Our team lost. But next round, I spawned as the Big Daddy. Payback's a bitch (with a drill hand).

The other two modes are more interesting. In Adam Grab, the level contains a single Little Sister players must pick up and hold onto for as long as possible to gain points. When holding her, you're only able to fire plasmids, but everyone on the server immediately heads after you.

In Capture the Sister, one team must capture the Little Sister and get her to a vent, while the other must defend her. The catch: one player on the defenders is chosen to be the Big Daddy. He's enormously strong, but when dead, the player who had been controlling him respawns as a regular splicer again. If you're to stand a chance of getting that Little Sister, you must first work together to take down her strongest protector.

This created not only great teamwork in the games I played—defenders placing traps, attackers carefully timing their assaults—but a lot of excitement. As soon as anyone got the Little Sister, everyone in the room started screaming. The defenders are in a panic: They went this way! Quick, after them! The attackers are in a panic: Where's the vent?! Ohgodohgod. It creates tension, especially for the person carrying the Little Sister. The first time I grabbed her, I arrived at the vent to realize it takes a few agonizing seconds to get the Little Sister inside. I didn't make it, and our team lost.

But next round, I spawned as the Big Daddy. Payback's a bitch (with a drill hand).

Capture the Sister and Adam Grab are probably still too familiar to make a serious dent in the dozens of multiplayer games already vying for your time, but they *are* fun, and they don't feel incongruous in *BioShock*'s world. Perform well and you level up, unlocking new plasmids, weapons, attachments and new audio diaries. These explain the multiplayer's different characters, but also more about the world of *BioShock*.

Grand father

The first *BioShock* was a singular, staggering work, filled with memorable scenes, a unique sense of place and brilliant new characters. The second time around those characters are no longer new, that place is no longer unique and there's no single moment as significant as the climactic meeting with Ryan.

But it's still a great game. The small gap between "great" and *BioShock*'s status as an instant classic only feels enormous—it's not a condemnation. The mechanics that made the original *BioShock* such fun return, better than before. It's still better written than pretty much anything else out there. It doesn't all go to hell at the end. The multiplayer is fine. It is a great game.

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A return to the underwater nightmare FPS, this time as a Big Daddy **RELEASE** February 9, 2010 **EXPECT TO PAY** $50 **PLAY IT ON** Dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850 **MULTIPLAYER** 5 modes, online only **PUBLISHER** 2K **DEVELOPER** 2K Marin **LINK** bioshock2game.com **INFLUENCED BY** *BioShock*, collectivism **ALTERNATIVELY** *BioShock* (91%) **COPY PROTECTION** Keycode/disc check **ESRB** M

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

Similar and slightly improved mechanics make this a worthy sequel, despite a sadly less-memorable story.

0% BETTER >> 100% **90%**

++ EDITORS' CHOICE ++

Who needs mortars when you've got Merlin?

KING ARTHUR

Adding wizardry to *Total War*–style tactical battles results in something magical

Long, long ago in the time of Merlin and Morgan Le Fay, a cowled knight arrived at the hall of Sir Reviewsgamesalot and bid him challenge.

Reviewsgamesalot accepted the challenge and was swiftly smote down. As he lay smoted, smited, or possibly smitten upon the ground, he spake thusly "In this last twelvemonth I have done battle with many goodly strategy games, but none more goodly than thee. If thee spare my life, I will tell the world of thy unexpected mega-awesomeness."

King Arthur—The Roleplaying Wargame (for that was the stranger's true name) agreed, and Sir Reviewsgamesalot was as good as his word. From thence onward he told all that would listen of the *Total War*–style strategy epic that bound so deftly Celtic lore with Arthurian legend. All marvelled when he described the especial wonders of the campaign.

Eventful knights

"In the span of one hour I have slain Saxons in Wessex, Sidhe spirits in Bedegraine Forest and giants in the Welsh wilds. I have conquered lands, forged alliances, and rescued damsels. I have won-over wavering knights with gifts of fiefdoms, brides and wizard's artifacts.

"I have built strongholds and I have passed laws. I have learned magic and wandered like a blind ewe from the Old Faith to the new. A hundred fascinating choices I have made, and, oh, I have quested, too.

"No kitchen knave chores these, but miniature text adventures torn from the manuscripts of Malory. A trove of mysteries, puzzles, plots and politics so rich, rooted, and spiced with randomness, it maketh the Total Warrior weep. Here, a gilded scroll at Bodmin summons the young King to choose sides in the feud betwixt Balin and Balan. Here, at Dorchester another invites him to aid Idris in the murder of his bastard

Total War has the edge on the battlefield.

Go, elite Giant Castration Squad!

The inscription? "Stay safe, Honeydumpling. Love, Guinevere".

Random quests and the alignment system promote replayability.

son Harald. Sir Percivale is lost in the forest! A hermit in Harrow has a vision to share! Some foul creature is stealing the children of Salisbury! Come, bold knights, quit your tourneys, there is work to be done.

"And even the smallest of these thickets is crisscrossed by paths. Perchance a force of brigands riseth in your kingdom. Yea, you could do battle, but at what price in blood? Would it not be wiser to parley first? Perhaps if plied with gold, food, or a magic bauble, the villains might leave peaceably. Perhaps if the purse were fat enough, they might even agree to serve as sheriffs, or march beneath your banner."

Sir Reviewsgamesalot continued, "Soothly, the adventures maketh the man. In *King Arthur* we are but coins on the Round Table of character. Every decision slides us one way or the other. In this quarter, the servants and spells of the Godly Tyrant. In this, those of the Rightful Druid. Which am I? Whence am I drawn?"

But Sir Reviewsgamesalot spake also of *King Arthur*'s minor tactical failings. He mentioned how the AI, though formidable once engaged, could be cautious in attack and reluctant to divide its strength. "It oft fails to protect its victory locations, meaning low curs may snatch gamey victories with bands of roving horsemen." And he gave voice to his interface ill-humor, saying with a guilty heart how he missed *Total War*'s army organization buttons and clever feedback systems.

Noble *King Arthur*, hearing of this treachery, sought out Sir Reviewsgamesalot and kicked the knight really hard in the knuts. **TIM STONE**

Round timetable

In this Arthurian world, every season has its reason

Spring
As Britannia shakes off her shroud of snow, quest scrolls like magic primroses bloom across the land. Now is the moment for knights-errant to go adventuring and wise kings to make last-minute preparations for the coming summer of slaughter.

Summer
A time of dust, drought and death. The long days mean more movement points for military units. Thinking of invading a neighboring land or probing the tangled heart of Bedegraine Forest? If you're not on the road by mid-summer, forget it.

Autumn
The taxes that pay men-at-arms, fund urban works and grease diplomatic wheels roll into treasuries at Samhain. Granaries, too, are replenished. A meager harvest of grain or gold may indicate corruption in high places or a roving bandit problem.

Winter
No one strays far from firesides during the bitter months of Alban Arthuan. With units confined to castles and camps, there is little to do but restock ravaged ranks, spend upgrade points, commission research and cuddle-up with comely consorts.

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** Strong *Total War*–style strategy with rich RPG embellishments **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $40 **PLAY IT ON** P4 3.4GHz, 1GB RAM, GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850 **MULTIPLAYER** 2 players **PUBLISHER** Neocore **DEVELOPER** Neocore **LINK** kingarthurthewargame.com **INFLUENCED BY** Le Morte d'Arthur, Celtic myth, the *Total War* series **ALTERNATIVELY** *Rome: Total War* (92%) with *The Fourth Age: Total War* mod **COPY PROTECTION** Steam **ESRB** N/A

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

A supreme strategy game, rich with incident and detail. Finally some worthy competition for the *Total War* series.

0% BETTER >> 100% 86%

++ GOOD ++

The robots have alien slugs in their heads. Where's my salt?

Point, shoot, kill, yawn. Repeat as required.

The jetpack isn't the utopian liberator that it is in real life.

DARK VOID

Joyless jetpacks? A could-have-been-great gimmick fails to take flight

Getting *Dark Void*'s jetpack is like unwrapping a hoverboard-shaped Christmas present, only to discover it's a skateboard. Without wheels. Capcom's alien-blasting third-person shooter grants you its jet-powered treat about 30 minutes in, but you can only fly upward when the game allows it.

Until you upgrade another agonizing three-quarters of an hour later, the twin rockets strapped to your back will only propel you upward if there's an overhanging ledge to grab onto. You can hover, which is more of a slow fall, but the joy of owning a jetpack (as I do in real life) is about giving you *more* movement options, not fewer.

Don't bother firing the jetpack—there's no ledge above you.

Yeah, it's disappointing. The hero? Imagine a charmless Indiana Jones. The plot? A lurching, stupid mess of clichés deemed so unnecessary that the game's loading screen text will happily ruin it in advance, telling you all about aliens and the Void before you've even encountered them. It's about Purgatory *and* the Bermuda Triangle put together.

The aliens are, of course, the enemy. You fight them most effectively from cover, leaning against and shooting around handily placed low walls, spouting weak bullets or gobs of neon from your upgradeable weapons. What *Dark Void* attempts to do, to get around the crap AI and spammy combat, is stick you in interesting arenas. The first of these has you fighting by dropping down a cliff face, moving from ledge to ledge and shooting horizontally. It doesn't work. Corridor shooters are rarely fun, and this one demands you fall in one direction, camera angle lurching and spinning at queasy angles, popping idiotic aliens who are using the bottom of the ledges for cover. They repeat it a few times, both downward then upward, teasing you with huge vistas, then cramming you into prescribed, horribly designed routes. It doesn't matter if it's on the inside of a floating power generator or dangling from an upended ship, it's still the same annoying action sequence.

Out of control

When you do get full access to the jetpack (you have it for two minutes at the very start of the game), it finally allows upward motion and adds a full-on jet mode. The latter zooms you through the air, leading your direction with the mouse pointer, but you're barely in control. Instead of giving you ample time to learn the fundamentals, you're given a few instructions and a couple of those awful horizontal fights, then thrown into a sky-battle where it's nearly impossible to take the UFOs down without jumping into an awful quick-time event.

Even when the game approaches being enjoyable in some of the bigger fights, it follows annoying patterns and never lets you break free and enjoy yourself. What a waste. **CRAIG PEARSON**

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A third-person action game with jetpacks and aliens **RELEASE** January 15, 2010 **EXPECT TO PAY** $40 **PLAY IT ON** Dual-core 2.6GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800/Radeon 4850 **MULTIPLAYER** None **PUBLISHER** Capcom **DEVELOPER** Airtight **LINK** darkvoidgame.com **INFLUENCED BY** *The Rocketeer, Gears of War* **ALTERNATIVELY** *Prototype* (86%) **COPY PROTECTION** None **ESRB** T

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

An over-designed shooter that missed the joy in its central concept and instead locks you into purgatorial combat loops.

0% BETTER >> 100% **30%**

++ INTOLERABLE ++

This is going to hurt a *lot*, isn't it?

TALES OF MONKEY ISLAND: CHAPTER 5

Guybrush—dead?

Two-on-one insult swordfighting? That's not fair!

As Telltale's episodic take on *Monkey Island* drifts off into the sunset, the big question is this: Was it worth the trip? Yes. Not only is this the first truly episodic game, with its one continuous story, character development, regular releases and puzzles that actually build on each other month-to-month, it's been a damn good adventure in its own right.

What's most notable about this episode, *Rise of the Pirate God*, is how it treats the characters. For the first time since the early '90s, LeChuck gets to be a force to be reckoned with instead of simply a blundering comic foil—not just beating up Guybrush, but really putting him through the emotional wringer. The relationship between the two, especially alongside Elaine and new girl Morgan (easily Telltale's best addition to the series) is a genuine pleasure, even if the wider story about El Esponja Grande and how it relates to the Land of the Dead is just a bit too silly. The biggest mistake the series makes is trying to tie things up too neatly, especially when it comes to how much of the action is presented as a result of various unbelievable plans and schemes, instead of regular opportunism and good old-fashioned luck.

As an adventure in its own right, *Rise* is satisfying. More than ever, you can hear the creak of monthly release pressures pushing down on it, but the puzzles are fun and it's a great way to pass an evening. As the credits roll, two things come to mind. First, love or hate the series, there's no doubt Telltale are leaving it in better shape than they found it. Second, I hope we don't have to wait another 10 years for more. **RICHARD COBBETT**

VITALS **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $35 (for 5 episodes) **PLAY IT ON** 3GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, GeForce 6800/Radeon 9800 **MULTIPLAYER** None **LINK** telltalegames.com **PUBLISHER** Telltale **DEVELOPER** Telltale **COPY PROTECTION** Online Activation **ESRB** E

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

0% BETTER >> 100% **81%**

++ GOOD ++

...And that's how Indy got rid of three of the most annoying characters.

The famous Indy vs. Red Indy clone scene!

Useless, lazy son never does any of the heavy lifting.

LEGO INDIANA JONES 2

When an opportunity to punch Shia LaBeouf presents itself, you take it

Thanks, Traveller's Tales. Just as we'd all just about forgotten the horror that was *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, here comes *LEGO Indiana Jones 2* to supply the one adventure missing from the previous game. Oh, that movie. Mental blocks...failing. Shia LaBeouf...exists. I remember...I was in a theater. There was...a fridge. The pain…

Gameplay sticks firmly to the formula of the previous game. Run around, smash everything in sight, unlock goodies, watch cute tongue-in-cheek cut-scenes that gently mock the story about as much as they retell it. This is primarily *Crystal Skull: The Game*, but *LI2* also revisits the original movies in a very short and unsatisfying way.

The main gameplay additions are some genuinely snazzy giant bosses who look cool, even if they clearly have nothing to do with the films, a level editor and a split-screen mode. There's also been a general streamlining of the old smash-and-grab formula, with far fewer scenes where it's not obvious what you're meant to do.

The most visible change is that *LI2* now uses a hub system for each movie/chapter of *Crystal Skull*, which looks excellent—a highly condensed version of each movie that lets you walk from Nepal to Sallah's place just by running over a bridge, but makes it far too hard just to find the next map or other thing you need, even if you know the films. *Last Crusade*, for instance, starts you in a map based on Venice, but the action actually kicks off in Germany. Similarly, while it's great that the hubs offer loads of bonus areas in addition to the story ones, it's incredibly frustrating not to be told what items or skills you'll need to bring along (anything from high jumping to a Staff of Ra) without actually going inside one. Worse, the driving levels are unbelievably appalling.

A much bigger disappointment is what should have been the highlight: the level editor. It's fun to play with, but very limited. Most bizarrely, there's no way to share your creations with others. *LittleBigPlanet* this is not.

Overall, this is the better of the two *Indy*s, with more interesting design, a larger amount of stuff to find, and a much bigger scope. However, for the proper, actual *Indy* experience made plastic, the nature of the films themselves mean you'll get more from *Raiders* or *Last Crusade* back in the first game. **RICHARD COBBETT**

On the plus side, at least they're not snakes.

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** Filling in the *Crystal Skull*–shaped gap from the first game, every *Indiana Jones* movie in cute LEGO form. Not too serious, not too challenging **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $20 **PLAY IT ON** P4 2GHz, 1GB RAM, GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850 **MULTIPLAYER** 2 players (on one PC) **PUBLISHER** LucasArts **DEVELOPER** Traveller's Tales **LINK** indianajones.lego.com **INFLUENCED BY** Little magic blocks of fun, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* **ALTERNATIVELY** *LEGO Star Wars* (87%) **COPY PROTECTION** Disc check **ESRB** E

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

The series desperately needs a bigger leap forward, but this sequel fills the obvious Indy gap with no small style.

0% BETTER >> 100% **71%**

++ FAIR ++

RISE OF FLIGHT

Sights and sounds are thrilling, but this sim needs more content filling

Yes, that wooden thing on the front should be spinning.

The first air warriors perished in numerous hideous ways, and *Rise of Flight* lets you try out most of them. Burn alive after taking a fuel tank hit, drop to your doom after shedding your wings in an over-eager dive or break every bone in your body after spinning out of a duel with a Dr.I. Piloting these wiry war machines is actually pretty straightforward, even with realism options. The challenge is flying them at their limits while some bedroom Boelcke riddles your tail with sizzling lead.

Detail is impressive. Russian outfit Neoqb has created a fleet of faux Fokkers, Albatrosses, Spads and Sopwiths that deceive the ear as consummately as they do the eye. I've flown every WWI sim since *Red Baron* and have never experienced anything quite this raw, exhilarating or believable.

Multiplayer is at the heart of the sim, and most of the servers are "full realism" and crawling with canny aces. The good news is that half those aces will be on your side—all scenarios are team-based.

AI pilots will test you, but strangely, were smarter in the beta.

Sadly, the single-player mode is spartan. Call me old-fashioned if you must, but I like my sky sims to come with configurable dogfight generators and enveloping, dynamic campaigns. A mission editor, a sprinkle of single sorties and a campaign engine that randomly generates its challenges but doesn't encourage freelancing or foster a sense of squadron don't quite cut it.

You may also want to hang back if you like your hangars well-stocked. *RoF* ships with just four flyables: the Fokker D.VII, Spad XIII, Albatross D.Va and Nieuport 28. Extra birds, such as the iconic Camel and Dr.I, will cost you. Ah *IL-2*, how we miss thy generosity. **TIM STONE**

VITALS **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $40 **PLAY IT ON** Dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850 **MULTIPLAYER** 32 players **LINK** riseofflight.com **PUBLISHER** 777 **DEVELOPER** Neoqb **COPY PROTECTION** Must log in online to fly **ESRB** E

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

0% BETTER >> 100% **82%**

++ GOOD ++

Well, they *looked* like zombies.

I call this one "The Jelly Donut."

ZOMBIE DRIVER

GTA, minus the guilt of killing the living

It's a little hard to take a game about surviving the undead apocalypse seriously when it slavishly follows seatbelt laws. "No, sorry Mr. Fifth Survivor, I can't give you a lift to safety—this taxi only legally has room for four people. What do you mean you could squeeze in? Don't be ridiculous. And for goodness sake, stop crying."

Zombie Driver is a very silly game, though not as silly as it would've been if it was indeed about a zombie who could drive. Instead, it's *Crazy Taxi* at the end of the world—collect and rescue folks before a timer runs down, killing hundreds of shambling deadheads by splatting and shooting. The top-down perspective and matchstick-sized walking corpses give ample room to observe just how absolute the zombie apocalypse is, and for a budget-priced game it's fat with detail and destruction.

It's at its best when your vehicle is heavily upgraded, able to slam through one enormous horde while mowing down the next one with a rocket launcher or railgun. Every kill earns cash, so as well as the sick thrill of the massive red blood pool your violent passage leaves behind, you'll be excited about the new toys you can buy. Frustratingly, though, it's incredibly stingy about ammo, so you don't ever get to truly revel in the icky destruction for more than a couple of seconds. This might make it more of a survival game, but c'mon: You're in a city full of zombies. You want to kill them all.

It's short and simple, which is just as well. Tedium creeps in during the last couple of hours, and reaching your far-flung goals becomes a chore: more *Zombie Commuter* than *Zombie Driver*. **ALEC MEER**

VITALS **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $10 **PLAY IT ON** P4 2.4GHz, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850 **MULTIPLAYER** None **LINK** zombiedriver.com **PUBLISHER** Exor **DEVELOPER** Exor **COPY PROTECTION** Steam **ESRB** N/A

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

0% BETTER >> 100% **70%**

++ FAIR ++

GYROMANCER

Strategy and sapphires beat swords and sorcery.

Gyromancer is a puzzle game with identity issues. At heart, it's *Bejeweled Twist*, served up by the casual game kings at PopCap. As for the wrapping, that's Japanese RPG–lite, welded together by *Final Fantasy* maestros Square Enix. Can this fusion of East and West put *Puzzle Quest* in its place? Well, no. It gives it a damn good try though, even if it is—in a way—only half the game it could have been.

The main difference between *Gyromancer* and *Puzzle Quest* is that while both use gem-swapping as a metaphor for epic battles between good and evil, *Gyromancer* doesn't have you compete directly with your opponent. You Twist on your own, with both sides filling up their attack gauges depending on how well you do. When the gauges fill, attack gems are added to the board. Matching up your attack gems deals massive damage to the enemy's face. Take too long, and the ass that gets kicked is yours.

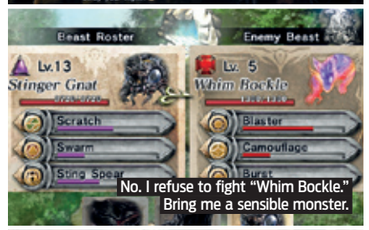
Of course, there's more to it than that. *Gyromancer*'s RPG side shuffles along with inventory objects, leveling and a very dull plot line tying the battles together, and special abilities that affect gems but aren't noticeable for great swathes of the game.

The puzzle side, on the other hand, works much better. Using Twist as the core game makes for a much more tactical puzzle than *Puzzle Quest*'s regular match-three, while playing solo means the AI can't cheat. Things start out simple, but soon the kid-gloves come off: As you progress, failing to match gems each and every turn becomes increasingly suicidal, with wasted turns going straight into the enemy's attack gauge. Some battles are sadistically hard, although dying isn't too painful.

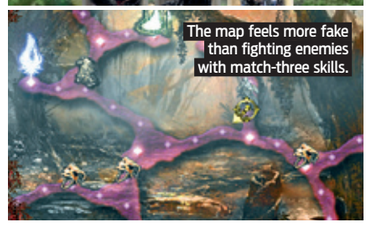
The weakest link in the three-gem chain is the chunky interface. You can't see what the attack gems do without running the mouse over them, making it tough to read the board at a glance. Likewise, your inventory objects are listed and stored on a sub-menu, not on the main screen.

It's a testament to the basic game that its problems don't stop the puzzling being fun and compelling. A good fight is deeply satisfying, especially the sight of an enemy's health-bar vanishing under a volley of pyrotechnic death. In that, *Gyromancer* lives up to *Puzzle Quest*'s legacy, even though its weak RPG disqualifies it from becoming the true successor. **RICHARD COBBETT**

Cut-scenes convey the dull plot. Feel free to skip over them.



No. I refuse to fight "Whim Bockle." Bring me a sensible monster.


The map feels more fake than fighting enemies with match-three skills.

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A mix of PopCap puzzling and Square Enix RPGs. But mostly puzzling **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $15 **PLAY IT ON** 2.4GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, any videocard **MULTIPLAYER** None **PUBLISHER** Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Square Enix/PopCap **LINK** dlgames.square-enix.com/gyromancer **INFLUENCED BY** *Puzzle Quest* **ALTERNATIVELY** *Puzzle Quest* (87%) **COPY PROTECTION** Steam **ESRB** T

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

A brave effort with interesting puzzles, but boring RPG elements really make you want to see how PopCap alone would have handled the same concept.

0% BETTER >> 100% **71%**

++ FAIR ++

Whattya think? Is a career in brain surgery for me?

ROGUE WARRIOR

So bad you'll beg for it to end quickly—and it will

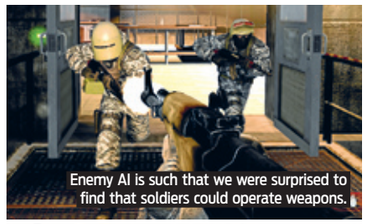
Try as it might, *Rogue Warrior* can't be over fast enough. It's only two hours long. That's not a comedic exaggeration; I have the stopwatch to prove it. Two hours of the most tedious, uninspired run-and-gun action you'll ever encounter. Pathetic.

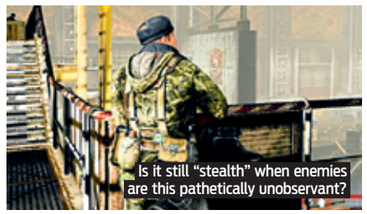
Your character for this mess is one Richard "Demo Dick" Marcinko (don't laugh, he's a real guy—a former U.S. Navy SEAL, voiced here by Mickey Rourke), a badass even Steven Seagal would find over the top. Rourke sounds as bored as he should be, and as funny as the constant swearing is for the first five and a half seconds, it quickly leaves you begging for even *Modern Warfare 2*'s taste and restraint.

Don't mistake any of this for realism. God knows what Marcinko got up to in his career, but I'm going to hazard a guess he didn't personally prevent the destruction of the United States by evil Soviet nukes.

The weapons feel terrible, the enemy AI is a bad joke, and most of the levels are painfully built around your inability to scale waist-high obstacles. Stealth kills offer the only trace of fun in the game, but don't get your hopes up—they get old fast. Run up to an enemy, hit the E button and Marcinko deploys his awesome Cut Scene Power: bullets bouncing off his temporarily invincible torso, explosions not even singing his hair until he's done with the increasingly dull throat-slicing/face-stabbing.

This has the nasty side-effect of turning much of the game into just running from enemy to enemy, taking advantage of the handy invulnerability it provides. There's a cover system for regular gunplay, but it's mediocre at best and generally tiresome. Much of the time, it's smarter to just crouch behind something the old-fashioned way, since at least then you won't get stuck on the edge. The really smart thing is to quit out early, uninstall it and play damn near anything else instead. **RICHARD COBBETT**


Enemy AI is such that we were surprised to find that soldiers could operate weapons.


Is it still "stealth" when enemies are this pathetically unobservant?

VITALS **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $50 **PLAY IT ON** Dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850 **MULTIPLAYER** 8 players **LINK** roguewarrior.com **PUBLISHER** Bethesda **DEVELOPER** Rebellion **COPY PROTECTION** Steam **ESRB** M

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

0% BETTER >> 100% **25%**

++ INTOLERABLE ++

Slay Darkspawn in 12 Easy Steps

GET STARTED

DIFFICULTY Easy
TIME 40 hours

VITAL LINKS

The *Dragon Age* wiki. Everything you need to know.
dragonage.wikia.com

Get all the latest info from the official forum
social.bioware.com

Find the latest mods and other goodies
www.dragonagenexus.com

The Missing Manual, going deep into the stats (in progress)
dragonage.gulbsoft.org

We show you how to rule in **Dragon Age: Origins**

Dragon Age is one of the best RPGs in years, and an often astonishingly brutal one. Despite recharging health, revivable party members, and health potions, even a regular fight can completely wipe out your whole group if you don't know what you're doing and how to make use of your companions' talents. On anything above the easiest difficulty setting, your mages need to watch for friendly fire, your tanks need babysitting and it's not enough to be ready for a fight—when everything kicks off, you need a plan.

Luckily, we're here to help. As well as the obvious warnings, like always making sure to switch back on your buffs after a character revives, we've gathered together 12 great hints to help you be the greatest Grey Warden in Ferelden—which, admittedly, isn't too difficult when the only real competition is Alistair. We'll let you in on a few secrets that will make it that much easier to prepare for the Blight and keep your team alive—even the ones who aren't Mages and are therefore irrelevant. What? You're not playing as a Mage? For shame! Restart the game immediately and make a Mage, because Mages are best. Especially with Arcane Warrior, so you can...but we digress.

1 THE GREY WARDEN

With nine companions, you can choose whatever character type you like—there'll be someone to fill the gap. Warrior or Mage are the best options, though, just for the few cases when you have to go solo. The most important character-specific stat is Coercion: upgrade it every time you can. It'll enable Persuasion dialogue options if your Cunning is high, and Intimidation ones if your Strength is. Those come in very handy on your quest.

2 TALKING TACTICS

Whether you want to use the Tactics system or not, at least create this rule: Self: Health < 50% - Action: Use the most powerful health poultice. Move it right to the top of the list. This saves you endless micromanagement, although it will burn through your health packs like nobody's business. We'll get to that in a moment. Set any other tactics you like, but don't rely on them—pausing and just issuing orders is much more dependable.

3 POPPING POULTICES

Why does everyone in Ferelden "drink" poultices, anyway? Gross. Anyway, you can never have enough, especially if you're stuck looting or buying them from the tight-fisted merchants. Instead, head to the Dalish Elves in Brecilian Outskirts and you'll find a vendor with unlimited Elfroot. Return to camp, and you can buy unlimited flasks. With those in hand, you can whip up hundreds of Lesser Health Poultices with your or Morrigan's Herbalism.

4 KNOW THY STRENGTHS

Every one of your companions should fill a role—for instance, Morrigan as the mistress of direct damage, Leilani for picking locks, and Shale as a tank. It's best to bolster their existing skills rather than try and add one later, and ratchet up their key-stats as much as possible. For instance, a mage should never be in a straight-up brawl, so Constitution is irrelevant. Instead, focus on developing their Magic stats and a bit of Willpower.

5 BAND OF MAGES

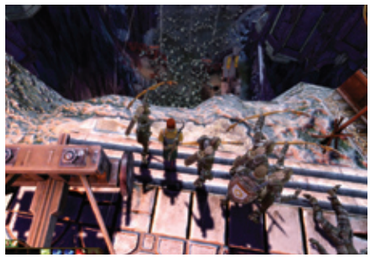
Mages are your best asset and Morrigan is a phenomenal combat mage, especially backing up your character. You want two in your team at all times, covering different types of elemental damage—typically Morrigan for frost and the Warden/Wynne with one of the others. Spirit Healing is an excellent Specialization to learn, just to get Revival. Don't waste points on Shapeshifting—it's worthless. Make sure to diversify your skills.

6 1 + 1 = MAGICAL FUN

Some spells combine to create a third bonus effect—but the system isn't very intuitive. The basic one, Grease + Fire = Burning Grease is straight forward, but combining Force Field and Crushing Prison to make a shockwave doesn't make much sense. Some useful ones are Sleep + Horror to create Nightmare, Spell Might + Animate Dead to get a better minion, and overlapping glyphs of Paralysis and Repulsion to lock down everyone in the area.

7 KIT AND CANOODLING

Your party gets more powerful by leveling up and buying better gear, but stats can also be improved by character interactions. At 25, 50, 75 and 90 percent approval each character gets a boost to a key stat—Constitution for Alistair, Willpower for Wynne and so on. Most points are won or lost through your moral choices and dialogue options, but you can also get a good boost by picking the right gifts, like Andraste trinkets for Leilani or paintings for Sten.



8 BATTLEFIELD CONTROL

Positioning is crucial. The further you get into the game, the easier it is for even regular fights to wipe your party. Most of this is common sense—keep mages at the back, keep the enemies interested in your toughest warriors and for Pete's sake don't Fireball your tank, you inconsiderate clod. What's less obvious is that putting mages behind cover actually works, and that a Stealthed rogue can lay traps right under enemies' noses.

9 BRB, MR. OGRE

If you find an encounter difficult or need to restock mid-battle, just up and leave and come back later. Dead enemies don't respawn when you come back, so you can take as long as you like earning levels or upgrading you equipment before returning to finish the fight. Some of the critical quests, like the assault on the Mage's Tower and the endgame, are exceptions, and lock you in until you're done, but you'll be warned about this in advance.

10 NICE SHINY ARMOR

The benefit of sticking with a standard team is that you can put all your resources towards gearing them up. If you're spending money on equipment for party members you don't always use, you're not going to be able to afford the best for the rest. If you want to give your main warrior better protection, slay some dragons and drakes in the Haven temple; Wade's Emporium in Denerim can turn their scales into some of the game's best gear.

11 BOSS BASHING

Bosses (creatures with orange names) hit hard, but aren't usually too tricky to vanquish if you have a few poultices. A mage can even fight toughies like Loghain just by running ahead, pausing to shoot something and quaffing a few potions when they get hit. Frost spells like Winter's Grasp are a great way of keeping the boss busy while you take out their goons. After that, hold their attention with a warrior and unleash the mages.

12 MAGIC TOUCH

Mages don't just dish out damage—their best spells work in concert with your melee troops to enable devastating combo attacks. Use Cone of Cold followed by anything that gives a Critical Hit to shatter enemies in two attacks. Cast Force Field to protect your tank and you can easily have an apocalyptic mix of Blizzard, Inferno and Tempest turn entire rooms into death fields without having to worry about the friendly fire implications.

SKILLS

BE A MORE EFFECTIVE INFECTED

TIPS FOR *LEFT 4 DEAD 2*

1 As a Charger, it's your job to split up the Survivors when they're clustered: The ones you don't grab will be sent flying. Charge someone into a low ceilinged area and you'll bang them against the roof as well as the floor.

2 As a Spitter, your drool does *exponentially* more damage the longer Survivors linger in it. Save it for downed, pinned or surrounded Survivors who can't get away. In Scavenge mode, spit on dropped fuel cans to ignite them.

3 As a Jockey, remember you can jump surprisingly high and with little cooldown. Once you pounce, your first priority is to steer your victim out of the line of fire of the others. From there, you can ride him until dead.

BONUS SKILL

SURVIVOR TRICKS

Twin pistols are nearly twice as powerful as the Magnum, and the Grenade Launcher can stun a Witch.

HP MINI 311

Is this ION-powered netbook the game changer?

When Nvidia came by to show off the HP's Mini 311 to demonstrate the power of its ION platform in action (which combines Intel's low-power Atom processor with Nvidia's GeForce 9400M graphics accelerator, liberating PC gamers from the tyranny of Intel's wimpy 945G integrated graphics), it was as if they brought me in to interview a duck that spoke fluent English, Italian and Romanian—it challenged everything I thought I knew. The Mini 311 was handily displaying 1080p video. And running *Call of Duty 4*. On a *netbook*. But now that I've got one here in the *PC Gamer* compound, the experience is a little different, as if I finally got some one-on-one time with the duck and it only quacked.

Despite the girly swirl pattern on the lid, the Mini 311 is a handsome netbook with exceptionally large keys and a generously sized trackpad. It's too bad, however, that the keys feel slightly wobbly—it takes some getting used to—and that the trackpad doesn't track particularly well (though I'm rarely without my external mouse for gaming). The glossy 1366x768 11.6-inch screen is reasonably bright and the viewing angle is good enough to make you want to think twice about what you watch on the plane. And it's great that instead of frills like biometrics or lotion dispensers, the Mini 311 gives us some stuff we really need instead, like three USB ports, HDMI and—music to my ears—terrific Altec Lansing speakers.

But when I threw my own real-world 1080p video at the Mini 311 it gagged helplessly, and even struggled at times with 720p video. The GeForce 9400M has a long history of excellent service, so I'm placing the blame on the Atom N270 processor, which falls just short of the muscle needed to bring out the best in Nvidia's 3D accelerator.

Is it so bad? Maybe not. Because I got 24 frames per second (fps) out of *Defense Grid: The Awakening*, and over 30fps in *Torchlight*. I even managed to eke out 35fps in *Half-Life 2: Episode One*. And even with the GPU active I got a hair over six hours of battery life from the six-cell battery.

Lofty promises robbed the Mini 311 of the true measure of its success, which is that this model, for instance, runs games faster than the more expensive and lesser-equipped GeForce 9300M-based N10J from Asus. I would absolutely not hesitate to recommend the HP Mini 311 to gamers who are looking for a netbook, but spending a little more for the N280 proc will pay for itself the very first time you launch *Torchlight*.

SYSTEM SPECS **CPU** Intel Atom N270 (1.6GHz) **MEMORY** 2GB DDR3 **VIDEO** GeForce 9400M **STORAGE** 250GB 5400RPM HDD **DISPLAY** 11.6-inch LED (1366 x 768) **SOUND** Onboard **PSU** 6-Cell Lithium Ion Battery **OS** Windows 7 Home Premium 32-bit **CONNECTIVITY** Wireless 802.11a/b/g **FUN STUFF** Webcam **URL** hp.com **MSRP** Starts at $399, As configured, $510 **CATEGORY** Mid

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

With wobbly keys and iffy HD playback, the HP Mini 311 isn't the ideal showcase for Nvidia's ION platform—but it's among the brawniest of netbooks for gamers.

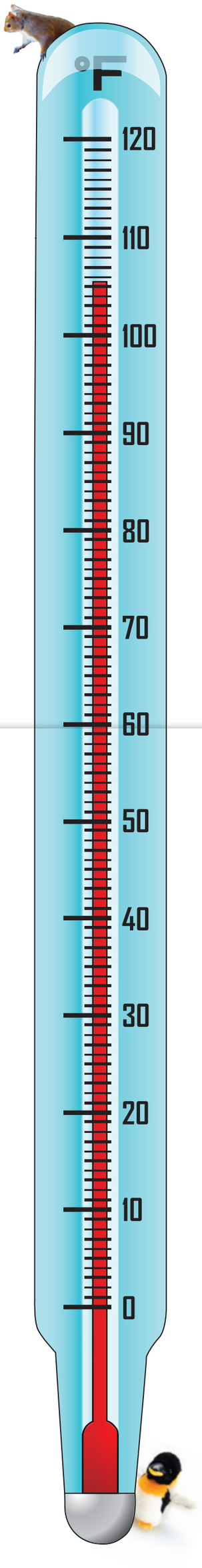
0% BETTER >> 100% **81%**

++ GOOD ++

THE HOTTEST HARDWARE

How good is your PC's gaming-fu?

There's more to choosing a videocard and CPU than just picking the latest and fastest model (features, compatibility and price need to be reckoned with), but we all know that performance is still what everyone really cares about (and what chicks dig). So we've weighted and rated virtually every consumer videocard and processor currently on the shelves in this chart—including the recent winning streaks of Radeon videocards and Intel Core CPUs—which you can use as an upgrading guide. Begin by looking up your current hardware on the chart—if you find you're falling too far down the thermometer, it may be time to heat things up.



GPUs

Radeon HD 5970 The undisputed performance champ. The 5970 is actually a dual-GPU videocard that can play any game maxed-out at 1900x1200 resolution, and single-handedly beat 20,000 out of 3DMark Vantage.

Radeon HD 5870 ATI's finest single-GPU videocard is an impressive beast. Not only does it trounce Nvidia's best card in most benchmarks, it also keeps its cool by drawing only 27W of power at idle and 188W during full load. The $380 price makes it a steal, especially for a flagship product.

Radeon HD 5850 The most well-rounded videocard in ATI's new lineup. The 5850 may be clocked 200MHz slower than the 5870 but the 10 percent drop in performance won't be as noticeable for most gamers as the $110 savings.

Radeon HD 5770 With the same specs and price as the last-generation 4870, this $160 card runs great on systems with 20-inch monitors. It one-ups last year's part by being 30 percent more power efficient.

GeForce GTX 260 Core 216SP The ever-so-slightly faster 55nm version of the Core 216.

GeForce GTX 260 Core 216 A new version of the GTX 260 that increases the number of stream processors from 192 to 216 for a significant performance bump.

Radeon HD 5750 Even at $110, this videocard eschews the low-end category. It's powerful enough to pump out high framerates in *Modern Warfare 2* and *Left 4 Dead 2*, and we recommend going with the 1GB frame buffer model.

GeForce GTS 250 Actually just a relabelled 9800GTX+ based on the G92 architecture, but with a smaller board.

Radeon HD 5970
Radeon HD 5870
GeForce GTX 295
Radeon HD 5850
Radeon HD 4870 X2
GeForce GTX 285
Radeon HD 4850 X2
GeForce GTX 280
Radeon HD 4890
Radeon HD 5770
GeForce GTX 275
GeForce GTX 260 Core 216SP
GeForce GTX 260 Core 216
GeForce GTX 260
Radeon HD 4870
Radeon HD 5750
GeForce 9800 GX2
Radeon HD 4770
GeForce GTS 250
GeForce 9800 GTX+
GeForce 8800Ultra
GeForce 9800 GTX
GeForce 8800GTX
Radeon HD 4850
GeForce 9800 GT
GeForce 8800 GTS 512
GeForce 8800 GTS
GeForce 8800 GT
GeForce 9600 GT
Radeon HD 3870
GeForce 7950GX2
GeForce 8800GTS 320/640
Radeon HD3850
Radeon X1950XTX
Radeon X1950 XT
Radeon HD2900 XT
GeForce 7950GT
Radeon X1900 XTX
GeForce 7900GTX
Radeon X1900 XT
Radeon X1900
Radeon X1800 XT
Radeon X1800 XL
GeForce 7900GTO
Radeon X1800 GTO
GeForce 7900GT
Radeon HD2900 Pro
GeForce 8600GTS
GeForce 7900GS
GeForce 7800GTX
GeForce 7800GT
GeForce 7800GS
Radeon X850 XT
Radeon HD2600 XT
GeForce 8600GT
Radeon X850 Pro
Radeon X800 XT
Radeon X800 XL
Radeon X800 GT
Radeon HD2600 Pro
GeForce 7600GT
GeForce 6800Ultra
Radeon 9800 XT
Radeon 9800 Pro
Radeon 9800
Radeon X1650 XT
Radeon X1600 XT
Radeon 9700 Pro
Radeon 9700
GeForce 6800GT
GeForce 6800GS
GeForce 6800GTO
Radeon X800 Pro
GeForce 6800
GeForce 6800XT
GeForce 6800LE
GeForce 7600GS
Radeon 9600XT
GeForce 6600GT
Radeon X1600 Pro
GeForce 6600
Radeon X600 Pro
Radeon 9600 Pro
GeForce 6600LE
GeForce 8500GT
Radeon 9600LE
Radeon HD2400 XT
GeForce 8400GS
Radeon HD2400 Pro
GeForce 7300GT
Radeon X1300
Radeon HD2350
Radeon 9550
GeForce 7300GS
GeForce 7200GS
GeForce 7100GS
GeForce 6200
GeForce 6150LE
GeForce 6100

CPUs

Core i7-975 Extreme Edition
Core i7-960
Core i7-950
Core i7-870
Core i7-940
Core i7-920
Core i7-860
Core i5-750
Core 2 Extreme QX9775
Core 2 Extreme QX9770
Core 2 Extreme QX9650
Core 2 Quad Q9650
Core 2 Quad Q9550
Phenom II X4 965 Black Edition
Phenom II X4 955 Black Edition
Phenom II X4 945
Phenom II X4 940 Black Edition
Phenom II X4 910
Phenom II X4 920
Phenom II X4 810
Core 2 Quad 9450
Core 2 Extreme QX6850
Core 2 Extreme QX6800
Core 2 Duo E6850
Core 2 Extreme X6800
Core 2 Extreme QX6700
Core 2 Quad Q6700
Core 2 Quad Q9300
Core 2 Duo E6750
Core 2 Duo E6700
Core 2 Quad Q6600
Athlon II X4 630
Athlon II X4 620
Phenom II X3 720 Black Edition
Phenom II X3 710
Phenom X4 9950 Black Edition
Phenom X4 9850 Black Edition
Phenom X4 9850
Phenom X4 9750
Phenom X4 9650
Core 2 Duo E8600
Core 2 Duo E8500
Phenom X3 8750
Phenom X3 8650
Core 2 Duo E6600
Athlon 64 X2 6400+
Core 2 Duo E6550
Athlon X2 6000+
Phenom 9600+
Phenom 9500+
Athlon 64 X2 5800+
Core 2 Duo E6420
Core 2 Duo E6400
Athlon 64 X2 5600+
Athlon 64 X2 5400+
Athlon 64 X2 5200+
Athlon 64 FX-74
Athlon 64 FX-72
Pentium D EE 965
Pentium D 960
Athlon 64 FX-70
Core 2 Duo E6300
Athlon 64 FX-62
Athlon 64 X2 5000+
Athlon 64 FX-60
Pentium D EE 955
Pentium D 950
Core 2 Duo E4600
Athlon 64 X2 4800+
Core 2 Duo E4500
Core 2 Duo E4400
Core 2 Duo E4300
Athlon 64 X2 4600+
Pentium D EE 840
Athlon 64 X2 4400+
Athlon 64 X2 4200+
Athlon 64 X2 4000+
Athlon 64 X2 3800+
Athlon 64 X2 3600+
Athlon 64 4000+
Athlon 64 FX-55
Athlon 64 3800+
Pentium D 945
Pentium D 840
Pentium D 820
Pentium 4 3.8GHz
Athlon 64 3700+
Athlon 64 FX-57
Pentium 4 3.6GHz
Pentium D 940
Athlon 64 FX-53
Athlon 64 FX-51
Pentium D 930
Athlon 64 3600+
Athlon 64 3500+
Athlon 64 3400+
Pentium D 830
Pentium 4 3.4GHz
Pentium 4 3.2GHz
Pentium D 805
Pentium D 925
Athlon 64 3200+
Pentium 4 3.06GHz
Pentium D 920
Pentium D 915
Pentium 4 3.0GHz
Athlon 64 3000+
Athlon 64 2800+
Athlon XP 3200+
Pentium 4 2.8GHz
Pentium 4 2.6GHz

Core i7-870 This Lynnfield-based CPU has 1156 pins, which works with P55 motherboards—not to be confused with Socket 1366 Core i7s (thanks for the confusing names, Intel). Clocked at 2.93MHz, this is the best processor you can buy without adopting the costly X58 motherboard platform.

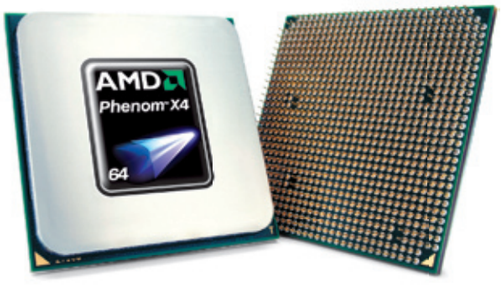
Core i7-920 The preferred Core i7 processor for high-end gamers—it's easily overclocked past 3GHz with a third-party air cooler.

Core i7-860 Middle-of-the-road price with excellent performance. This 2.8GHz part is only 133MHz slower than the Core i7-870, but costs half as much. Plus, it's overclockable!

Core i5-750 Priced at $200, this is the sole processor with the Core i5 moniker—for now. You sacrifice triple-channel DDR memory and Hyper-threading capability for cost, but in most day-to-day applications and games this proc schools even the fastest Athlon.

Phenom II X4 965 Black Edition AMD devotees love the Phenom II for its high overclocking capability and low cost. Consider that the fastest Phenom (clocked at 3.4GHz) is cheaper than the Core i5-750.

Athlon II X4 630 The era of the sub-$100 quad-core processor has arrived.



STEELSERIES XAI

GETTING SOUTHPAWS BACK IN THE GAME

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE ★★★★★

The Xai is in every way the equal to the SteelSeries Ikari—the hands-down best gaming mouse of all time that received a whopping 97% in October 2008—except for one thing: It's ambidextrous, with two thumb buttons on each side. That, as a right-hander, I much prefer the contours of the Ikari is rather predictable, but doesn't diminish the Xai's internal hardware, including a laser that picks up more megapixels than my camera and boasts SteelSeries' peerless tracking. Oh, and there's the extra-fancy 32x128 display tucked underneath the mouse, which allows you to swap profiles and save settings without ever having to use the included software (which is exceptionally well-designed—simple, minimal and effective). So take notice, right-handers: the lefties just leveled the playing field.

VERDICT: 95%

URL: www.steelseries.com MSRP: $90 CATEGORY: Dream

STEELSERIES KINZU

GREAT SENSOR GETS ENTRY-LEVELLED

The slim, smallish Kinzu—about the length of a bar of soap—has a fine optical sensor with many of the same enhancements as the Xai's (including software-customizable polling rate, if you're that intense). But it's too small even for my dinky hands, and I take issue with the lack of thumb buttons even on an entry-level gaming mouse. Thumbless gamers and people who aren't necessarily gamers but appreciate precision pointing will be thrilled, but the rest of us need something a little more versatile.

VERDICT: 76%

URL: www.steelseries.com MSRP: $35 CATEGORY: Entry

Q&A: Trinity on Trial

Q: I've become increasingly concerned with your choice of videocards for the Hard Stuff Trinity rigs. They're always Nvidia cards. Let's be honest—ATI's 3800 series was a bit disappointing and for a couple of years the crown really did belong to Nvidia. But the 4800 series turned that all around, and today the 5800s rule, yet you still insist on promoting Nvidia GeForce cards in all three of your Trinity systems. RICK CONDON

A: The Radeon HD 4870 had a brief moment of glory, but it was eclipsed in performance by the GeForce GTX 280 in the high end. But the HD 5800s really do rule in performance, as you pointed out. And since last month, in the Hard Stuff Trinity, too.

Q: I have issues with the Hard Stuff Trinity. For one thing, I don't agree with your specs for a "dream" system. I'm not sure why you would choose two GeForce 285s, for instance, when you could have two 295s instead. And why only six gigs of RAM instead of 12? It's supposed to be a dream system—the unattainable. My second issue is pricing. I can't seem to find some of the items for as low as you list them. MATTY C.

A: If you're looking for unattainable systems, just go to Voodoopc.com. But each rig in the Hard Stuff Trinity has an informal price cap: the Dream system at $3,000, the Mid at $1,500 and the Entry system at $500. All the prices come from pricewatch.com—I look for the lowest price I can find on a reputable brand from a retailer with no less than four-and-a-half star rating.

The Honorable Trinity rules in favor of the Radeon HD 5870.

Hard Stuff Trinity

DREAM SYSTEM		MID-RANGE		ENTRY-LEVEL	
CASE AND PSU		CASE AND PSU		CASE AND PSU	
COOLER MASTER COSMOS; 850W PSU	$423	NZXT ALPHA; OCZ GAMEXSTREAM 700W PSU	$175	GENERIC CASE; CORSAIR 450W PSU	$161
PROCESSOR		PROCESSOR		PROCESSOR	
INTEL CORE i7-950 3.06GHZ	$555	INTEL CORE I7-920 2.66GHZ	$270	AMD ATHLON X2 6000+ 3.0GHZ	$59
MOTHERBOARD		MOTHERBOARD		MOTHERBOARD	
ASUS P6T DELUXE V2	$270	ASUS P6T	$234	ASUS M3A76-CM	$68
MEMORY		MEMORY		MEMORY	
CORSAIR 6GB DDR3-1600	$155	CORSAIR 6GB DDR3-1333	$165	CORSAIR 2GB DDR2-800	$69
OPTICAL DRIVE		OPTICAL DRIVE		OPTICAL DRIVE	
LG WH08LS20 BLU-RAY	$179	LG GH22NP20	$31	SONY DDU1681S	$26
HARD DRIVE		HARD DRIVE		HARD DRIVE	
INTEL X25-M 80GB SSD; WD 500GB 7200RPM	$311	WD 500GB 7200RPM	$50	WD 250GB 7200RPM	$38
SOUNDCARD		SOUNDCARD		SOUNDCARD	
CREATIVE LABS X-FI TITANIUM	$96	ONBOARD	$0	ONBOARD	$0
VIDEOCARD		VIDEOCARD		VIDEOCARD	
RADEON HD 5870 (2)	$814	RADEON HD 5870	$407	GEFORCE GT 220	$70
	$2,803		$1,332		$491

The PC Gamer INTERNS' CHOICE AWARDS

Prentice Gede

Erik Belsaas

While the *PC Gamer* editorial brain trust toiled away in our underground bunker, gliding our feet over Persian carpets and swirling vintage Mountain Dew in platinum goblets while supping on the dangling Concord grapes held 'twixt the manicured nails of bespectacled librarian babes, the *PC Gamer* interns set up shop in the South wing, recently vacated due to asbestos crumbling from the ceiling. Their task: to identify the awards we missed and see that recipients were afforded the honors they deserved—or at least got what was coming to them.

Worst Crime Against Robotkind
Terminator Salvation

Worst Use of Megan Fox
Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen

Sad Choo-Choo Award for Terrible Steampunk
Damnation

Most Questionable Use of Hats
Star Wars: The Clone Wars - Republic Heroes

Dial-up's Choice Award for Frustrating Multiplayer Issues
Demigod

Most Mispronounced Game Title
Aion ("Eye-on")

Best Use of Balls
Zuma's Revenge!

Most Sinful Solar Systems
Sins of a Solar Empire: Entrenchment

Hippie Award for Best Peace Simulator
Dawn of Discovery

Dumbest Ending
Borderlands

Biggest Letdown
Duke Nukem Forever's new release date: never

No-Show Award
StarCraft II

Michael Bay Award for Gaping Plot Holes
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2

Reddest Factions
Red Faction: Guerrilla

Sad Coconut Monkey Award for Lowest-Scoring Game
Gobliiins 4 (11%, September '09)

Winner, Most Knowledge of Disney Channel Programming
Erik Belsaas

Netbook-in-PC-drag award
HP Firebird 802

Screenshot of the Year
"Oh god oh god oh god oh god oh no," *Killing Floor*, captured by Evan Lahti, May 22, 2009

Postcard from the *Killing Floor*.

PC GAMER

EDITORIAL
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF **Logan Decker**
REVIEWS EDITOR **Dan Stapleton**
ASSOCIATE EDITOR **Evan Lahti**
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR **Josh Augustine**
INTERNS **Erik Belsaas, Prentice Gede**
CONTRIBUTORS **Richard Cobbett, Tom Francis, Richard McCormick, Alec Meer, Craig Pearson, Graham Smith, Tim Stone**
PRODUCER **Debra Guilfoyle**
CATERING **Trader Joes**

ART
LEAD DESIGNER **Dan Fitzpatrick**
CONTRIBUTING DESIGNER **Shelley Szudera**
PHOTOGRAPHERS **Mark Madeo, Samantha Berg, Leah Christian**

BUSINESS
GROUP PUBLISHER **Kelley Corten** **kcorten@futureus.com**
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER **Kristen Salvatore** **ksalvatore@futureus.com**
SENIOR DIRECTOR NATIONAL ADVERTISING **Rachelle Considine** **650-238-2505, rconsidine@futureus.com**
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR INTEGRATED SALES **Nathan Hunt** **415-269-5408, nhunt@futureus.com**
REGIONAL SALES DIRECTOR **Isaac Ugay** **949-305-0767, iugay@futureus.com**
REGIONAL SALES DIRECTOR **Carol Gillard** **949-305-0767, iugay@futureus.com**
REGIONAL SALES MANAGER **Rachel Campos** **650-745-9207, rcampos@futureus.com**
ACCOUNT MANAGER **Arthur St. Germain** **650-238-2571, astgermain@futureus.com**
DETROIT CONSUMER MANAGER **Alan Dickinson** **248-792-2408, alandmedia@comcast.net**
SENIOR MARKETING MANAGER **Andrea Recio-Ang** **650-238-2548, arecio-ang@futureus.com**
MARKETING COORDINATOR **Allyson Kardel** **akardel@futureus.com**
ADVERTISING COORDINATOR **Jose Urrutia** **jurrutia@futureus.com**

PRODUCTION
PRODUCTION DIRECTOR **Richie Lesovoy**
PRODUCTION COORDINATOR **Dan Mallory**
PRINT ORDER COORDINATOR **Linh Chau-Ward**

CONSUMER MARKETING
DIRECTOR CONSUMER MARKETING **Rich McCarthy**
CIRCULATION MANAGER **Stephanie Blake**
NEWSSTAND DIRECTOR **Bill Shewey**
CONSUMER MARKETING OPERATIONS DIRECTOR **Lisa Radler**
RENEWAL AND BILLING MANAGER **Mike Hill**
BUSINESS MANAGER **Elliot Kiger**
SR. ONLINE CONSUMER MARKETING MANAGER **Jennifer Trinkner**
CUSTOMER SERVICE MANAGER **Mike Frassica**

FUTURE US, INC.
4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080
www.futureus.com
PRESIDENT **John Marcom**
VICE PRESIDENT/CFO **John Sutton**
VICE PRESIDENT INTERNET DEVELOPMENT **Tyson Daugherty**
EDITORIAL DIRECTOR GAMES GROUP **Stephen Pierce**
EDITORIAL DIRECTOR MUSIC **Brad Tolinski**
EDITORIAL DIRECTOR TECH **Jon Phillips**
GENERAL COUNSEL **Charlotte Falla**
HUMAN RESOURCES DIRECTOR **Nancy DuBois**

Future MEDIA WITH PASSION

Future US, Inc. is part of Future plc. Future plc produces carefully targeted special-interest magazines for people who share a passion. We aim to satisfy that passion by creating titles offering value for money, reliable information, and smart buying advice, and which are a pleasure to read. Today we publish more than 100 magazines in the United States, UK, France, and Italy. Over 100 international editions of our magazines are also published in 31 other countries across the world. The Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR). "What the..." Shepard remarked, as she spun her head to examine her current surroundings. "How'd I end up here?" The last thing she remembered was hitting the Mass Relay back to The Citadel. Could Joker have screwed up his FTL calculations? But then, that wouldn't make sense—she wasn't even on the Normandy. Just as she began to stand, she noticed another presence. A middle-aged woman, short, but imposing.; her human hair clinched tight in a bun behind her head. Something fierce glared in her eyes. "I need to know how you ended up on my ship." It wasn't a question, it was an order. "I'm not sure," Shepard replied, "I just woke up here. Where are we? Who are you?" "We, my dear lady, are in the Delta Quandrant," The lady turned around and opened the door, bathing the room in light. "And I am your worst nightmare. I am Captain Kathryn Janeway."

FUTURE plc
30 Monmouth St., Bath, Avon, BA1 2BW, England
www.thefuturenetwork.plc.uk / Tel +44 1225 442244
CHIEF EXECUTIVE: **Stevie Spring**
GROUP FINANCE DIRECTOR: **John Bowman**

REPRINTS: Contact Reprint Management Services, 717-399-1900, ext. 100.
SUBSCRIPTION QUERIES: Please visit www.pcgamer.com, email PCGcustserv@cdsfulfillment.com, call 800-898-7159, or write to PC Gamer Customer Care, P.O. Box 5158, Harlan, IA 51593-0658.
ISSN-1080-4471